

LOUISE BOURGEOIS' ART AS QUEER PERFORMANCE



by

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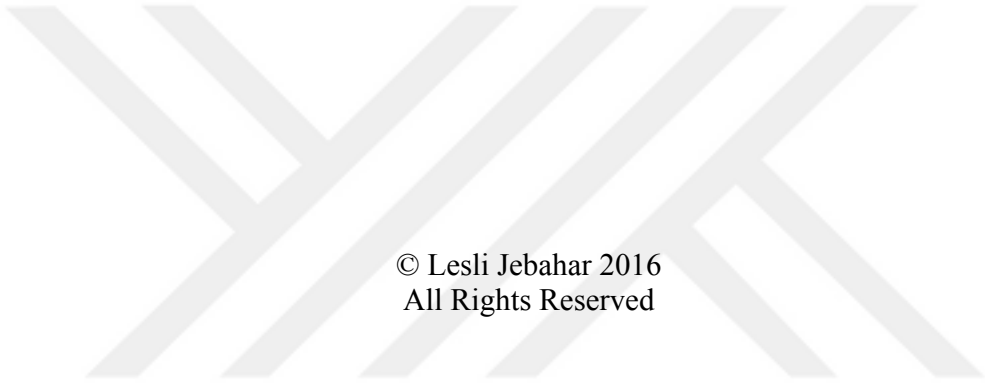
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ABSTRACT
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Supervisor: Prof. Sibel Irzik

Keywords: Art History, Louise Bourgeois, Gender, Auto portrait, Identity, Feminism, Queer, Performativity, Judith Butler, Maman, Femininity, Masculinity

This thesis offers an examination of the works of French artist Louise Bourgeois through the lenses of gender, queer and performance. One of the most well-known female artists of the 20th century, Bourgeois is known with detailed her explanations on her works. This research considers the works of the artist, her actions and her discourse alongside the works, as an entire performative act, and examines her performance in relation with feminist thinker Judith Butler's performative notions in gender theory. The works shown in this thesis feature an idea of gender ambiguity and an almost-queer identity. Among the works examined are a portrait of the artist by Robert Mapplethorpe, a photo-text titled *Child Abuse*, an installation titled *Destruction of the Father*, sculptures titled *Janus Fleuri*, *Nature Study* and *Maman*, and two documentaries on the artist. This thesis shows that Bourgeois' work and her artistic persona provides a way to think about a different and a more liberal idea of gender and identity.

ÖZET

LOUISE BOURGEOIS' ART AS QUEER PERFORMANCE

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Yüksek Lisans Tezi, Ocak 2017

Danışman: Prof. Dr. Sibel Irzık

Anahtar kelimeler: Sanat Tarihi, Louise Bourgeois, Cinsiyet, Otoportre, Kimlik, Feminizm, Kuir, Performans, performativite, Judith Butler, Maman, Kadınsılık, Erkeklik

Bu tez, Fransız sanatçı Louise Bourgeois'nın eserlerini cinsiyet, kuir, ve performans kavramları üzerinden incelemektedir. 20.yüzyılın en bilinen kadın sanatçılarından biri olan Bourgeois, eserleri ve kendi hayatı hakkında yaptığı konuşmaları ile öne çıkar. Bu araştırma, sanatçının eserleri ve eserlerinin dışında sahnelediği davranışları ve söylemler bütünü bir performans olarak ele alıp, tüm bunları kuramcı Judith Butler'ın cinsiyetin performatif oluşu teorisi üzerinden inceler. Tezde, sanatçının cinsiyetler arası farklılıkları muğlaklaştırdığı, neredeyse kuir bir cinsiyet öne sürdüğü eserleri incelenmektedir. İncelenen eserler arasında sanatçı üzerine yapılmış iki belgeselin yanı sıra, Robert Mapplethorpe'un sanatçı portresi, *Child Abuse* adlı sanatçı metni, *Destruction of the Father* adlı yerleştirme, *Janus Fleur*, *Nature Study* ve *Maman* adlı heykeller bulunur. Araştırmanın ışığında, Bourgeois'nın, eserleri ve performatif sanatçı kişiliği aracılığıyla farklı ve daha esnek bir cinsiyet tahayyülüne olanak sunduğu gözlenir.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. Objective and Method.....	1
1.2. Works.....	3
1.3. Chronology.....	4
1.4. Self-Narration and Its Discontents.....	8
1.5. Bourgeois and the Rise of the Feminist Movement.....	11
2. TANGERINES AND THE <i>ORANGE PERIOD</i> : THE ORIGINS OF GENDER QUESTION.....	14
2.1. Two Documentaries.....	14
2.2. Collage with Peels.....	17
2.3. Video Clip: How to Peel a Tangerine.....	20
3. MAPPLETHORPE AND <i>LA FILETTE</i>	23
4. <i>COSTUME FOR A BANQUET</i> AND <i>THE DESTRUCTION OF THE FATHER</i>	31
4.1. <i>Nature Study</i>	35
4.2. <i>Destruction of the Father</i>	36
4.3. <i>Janus Fleuri</i>	40
4.3.1. Is <i>Janus</i> a Cyborg?.....	41
5. <i>CHILD ABUSE</i> : A SIMPLE CONFESSION OR THE PORTRAIT OF A NATION?..	44
5.1. What Bourgeois expresses in <i>Child Abuse</i> : Endless Frustration of a Victimized Daughter.....	46
5.2. What Bourgeois implies in <i>Child Abuse</i> : Social Roles and Identities.....	49
5.2.1. Husband: The Found Diamond.....	55
5.2.2. Sons: Four Men in the House.....	56
5.2.3. Bourgeois' own motherhood.....	57
6. <i>MAMAN</i> : MOTHER OR A SELF-PORTRAIT?.....	60
7. CONCLUSION.....	72
8. BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	78
9. IMAGE CREDITS.....	83
10. APPENDIX.....	86

1. INTRODUCTION

Louise Bourgeois is often claimed to have inspired “a generation of artists to delve into and express their personal experience and emotions.”¹ Following Bourgeois’ success and artistic rigor, it can be said that autobiographical art started to be accepted as a noteworthy form of expression. Nevertheless, Bourgeois’ artistic success and acceptance did not come easily. She continued making art for years without being noticed. At a time when the feminist movement was irreversibly affecting the society and the writing of art history, spotlights were finally turned towards Bourgeois. She has since become one of the most important artists of the 21st century.

1.1. Objective and Method

Contrary to widespread tendencies of psychoanalyzing the artist and her works, and of separating her life from her works, I consider Bourgeois’ life and art as one complete performance. Inspired by Judith Butler’s theories on gender and performativity, my reading of Bourgeois focuses on the dynamics and construction of a queer gender in her performed artistic persona. In her theory of performativity, Butler explains how different rituals and repetitions of gender² are acted out in daily life and serve to construct the very gender identity assigned by society. She points out that by performing these accepted acts and gestures on a daily basis without questioning, we perpetuate the construction of gender. After revealing the performative aspect of gender construction, Butler suggests a way out of this heteronormative construct by using the same mechanisms of performance and repetition.

In the light of Butler’s arguments, I focus on certain performative moments of Bourgeois, both in her artistic life and in her works. I examine how she builds an almost-

¹ Trimble, Suzanne Isabelle (aka Bella Land). “Louise Bourgeois in Conversation.” *Third Text*, vol. 23, no. 6, 2009, p. 787 doi:10.1080/09528820903371180.

² Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1999, p.xv

queer personality where the lines between two genders are blurred by her own contradictory discourses, that can also be called performances. The aspect of “repetition” underlined in Butler also comes into light in Bourgeois’ life, for the artist continuously repeats certain narratives about her life story and avoids any further or deeper explanations. In such moments, she builds a certain identity for herself that is neither female or male, but is something that is both.

There are also moments where Bourgeois’ performances help maintain conventional definitions of hegemonic identity and not solely blur the lines of gender. I try to reveal how Bourgeois constructs these blurred and subverted gender lines, just like Butler claims we *manufacture* this thing called gender with our acts.

The primary sources I use are artist interviews, both in written formats and in video documentaries. I relate her works with her own explanations of them. I do not simply take her words as final, but attempt to develop an alternative reading by using clues from her surrounding body of work. As cultural theorists Mieke Bal perceptively suggests: “listening to her [Bourgeois] is fine, but repeating her words (only) reduces her work to one side of a multifarious, multi-layered complexity”.³ I, therefore carefully study what Bourgeois says and try to write what she does not say.

Another resource I rely on is Bourgeois’ commentary on her individual pieces. In addition, I use parts of a plethora of analysis written on the works of the artist. One of the most comprehensive anthologies on Bourgeois in fact combines many sources such as her commentaries, diary notes and letters along with her written interviews. I reach my arguments by keeping in mind chronology of the artist’s life, social context of her time, her own commentaries and arguments of art historians. I aim to synthesize a new way of looking at Bourgeois’ works and her daily performances by questioning what is not written about the artist and not said by the artist herself.

The manifestation of a queer identity reveals itself in a combination of Bourgeois’ works. Often times, what the artist does and what she says about a particular work becomes a part of the piece itself. I focus on these moments in which Bourgeois’ performances extend what the work has to offer and examine how she changes the dynamics of gender in these works.

³ Bal, Mieke. “Narrative Inside Out: Louise Bourgeois’ Spider as Theoretical Object.” *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1999, pp. 122. www.jstor.org/stable/1360637

I believe that approaching Bourgeois' work by focusing on the way she constructs an idea of gender is worthwhile because it shows many layers of identity and roles of gender in identity creation. Her probing in the theme of gender is still extremely valid in a world of extreme polarization. Even though, we can claim a significant improvement on gender equality today, the patriarchal hierarchy is still embedded in the social psyche. Examining a figure like Bourgeois and her works, which have affected generations to come, sheds light on one of the ways of being an authentic woman who is extremely fragile and naïve, but also sturdy and in control at the same time. The way Bourgeois blurs the definitions two sexes in her personality and works, the way she creates and performs a hybrid/queer identity, that is no longer either sex, show alternative possibilities of existence, identity and creativity.

1.2. Works

In order to develop my argument, I focus on Bourgeois' certain appearances and published narratives, and a group of her works, which allow a complex discussion on the idea of gender. There are two primary instances where Bourgeois dictates a specific narrative about her life and her relationship with her family. The chapter titled "*Tangerines and Orange Period*" focuses on a story from Bourgeois' childhood that she often recounts to explain her anger towards her father. The chapter titled "*Child Abuse*" examines the photo-text Bourgeois published in the well-known and prestigious magazine *Artforum*. Both these chapters illustrate the persona that Bourgeois creates as she performs and perpetuates a specific narrative about her life.

In addition, I focus on five works by the artist: The Mapplethorpe Portrait, the sculpture titled "*Costume for a Banquet*", the controversial sculpture series *Janus Fleuri*, the room-size installation *Destruction of the Father* and the giant sculpture titled *Maman*. The reason why I focus on these works is that they allow for a complex discussion of gender symbols. They feature primary symbols for both sexes (breasts and penis) and subvert the very ideas of female and male. Even though these works are from different time periods and are made with different media, they emphasize certain

keywords in Bourgeois' oeuvre by which the artist redefines, blurs and queers the idea of gender.

When writing about Louise Bourgeois, it is useful to keep in mind a timeline of her career. She is a distinctive artist because of the fact that her works began to be shown and recognized when she was quite old: she had her first retrospective at the age of 71. Before that, she had significant group shows at Peridot Gallery (1953) where she was exhibited alongside noticeable artists from her time and 112 Greene Street Gallery (1974), and a few solo shows that did not bring a significant visibility to the artist. Her career began to pick up exponentially after age 71. Publications of her writings and interviews proliferated following the retrospective. When looking at her works and the performative aspects of her life, we need to keep in mind that the persona is the construction of a narrative by a woman who has entered the elderly phase of her life. In this period Bourgeois was a woman who outgrew her roles as a wife and a mother and focused mainly on her art.

1.3. Chronology

Born in France in 1911, Bourgeois was the second daughter of a middle-class family who repaired antique textiles. Bourgeois' father fought in World War I and returned home with depression. He sought solace in extramarital adventures, one of which included young Louise's sit-in nanny/English tutor.⁴ The artist claims that her anger towards her father's betrayal and her mother's silent acceptance of it, along with other events in her past, fueled her art making during her entire life.

As an artist who lived for almost a century, until age 98, Bourgeois had several artistic phases. Following her mother's death, she married the American art historian Robert Goldwater and moved to the United States in 1938. During the first decade in her new country, she was mostly occupied with drawing and printmaking. She joined a printmaking atelier where she took classes from a renowned artist.⁵ In the 50s, Bourgeois

⁴ Paraphrased from the artist's own account in: *Louise Bourgeois: the Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine*. Directed by Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach., USA: Zeitgeist Films, 2008.

⁵ Wye, Deborah et al. *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1994. p.26.

started making wooden sculptures. Her series of primitive sculptures from the 50s is titled “*Personnages*” (Characters) and dealt mainly with her homesickness. Of “*Personnages*” the artist recalls, “It [was] a period without feet...During that period things were not grounded. They expressed a great fragility and uncertainty... If I pushed [the sculptures], they would have fallen. And this was self-expression.”⁶

Despite her few and unfrequented exhibitions, Bourgeois continued making sculptures. In the 60s, she broadened the range of her medium and started using primarily latex, among other materials. Her sculptures that blend abstract landscapes with organ parts are among one of the top highlights of this era.

Art historian and curator Deborah Wye, one of the first discoverers of Bourgeois’ art, writes that throughout the 50s and 70s the artist had an “underground existence”, with scarce public recognition.⁷ What tipped the scale for Bourgeois and turned things around is hard to pinpoint exactly and may be unnecessary too. However, historically it is possible to claim that a 1975 *Artforum* cover featuring *Destruction of the Father* and an accompanying essay by the esteemed feminist art historian Lucy Lippard foreshadowed Bourgeois’ promising career and her increasing public appearance.

Lippard, an activist who authored seminal feminist texts on the works of Eva Hesse and Nancy Spero, among others, was an important figure in the art world at the time. In 1966, she organized a mixed gallery show titled *Eccentric Abstraction* in which she included works by Bourgeois along with Hesse and Bruce Neumann. A year after the *Artforum* article, she used one of Bourgeois’ *Femme-Maison* prints on the cover of her book titled *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women’s Art*. In fact, art historian Griselda Pollock explains that she “come[s] from the generation who ‘discovered’ Louise Bourgeois through Lucy Lippard’s featuring her *Femme-Maison* (1974) on the cover of *From the Center* published in 1976.”⁸

Intended or not, Bourgeois became an important symbol for feminists and activists in the 70s. Her struggle for recognition in a male-dominated art scene resonated with one of the causes that feminists fought for on a broader scale:

Despite her apparent fragility, Bourgeois is an artist, and a woman artist, who has survived almost 40 years of discrimination, struggle, intermittent success

⁶ Gibson, Ann. “*Louise Bourgeois’s Retroactive Politics of Gender.*” *Art Journal*, vol. 53, no. 4, 1994, p. 46. doi:10.2307/777560.

⁷ Wye, 1994, p.12.

⁸ Pollock, Griselda. “To Inscribe in the Feminine: A Kristevan Impossibility? or Femininity, Melancholy and Sublimation.” *Parallax*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1998, p.83

and neglect, in New York's gladiatorial art arenas. The tensions which make her work unique are forged between just those poles of tenacity and vulnerability.⁹

While Bourgeois never placed her art deliberately in a feminist context, her work started to be read mainly through tensions of gender struggles.

As feminist activists continued their hard fight for recognition in the art world, MoMA decided to host its first retrospective show by a woman artist in 1982. This exhibition became a double debut; for the institution for showing a woman artist for the first time, and for the artist herself for having an exhibition on such a scale. The retrospective introduced a wide array of Bourgeois' practice to a large local and international audience. After 1982, at age 71, Bourgeois became more popular and widely accepted every year.

In 1992 one of her massive architectural works titled *Cell* was shown at Documenta 9, arguably the most prestigious international art exhibition organized every five years in Kassel. A year later, in 1993 she represented the United States at the Venice Biennial, arguably the second most prestigious international art exhibition. In 1994, her work exhibited in Venice was elaborated and shown at the Brooklyn Museum. The same year, MoMA opened another retrospective dedicated this time to her print works that she had been producing on and off since the 40s.

During her career, Bourgeois received two honor medals, one from the US in 1997 (presented by Bill Clinton), and the other from France in 2008 (presented by Nicolas Sarkozy).

One of the most interesting aspects of Bourgeois' career is that her success seemed to pick up the year after her husband Robert Goldwater died in 1973. Despite the copious articles written on her life and work, those that focus on her relationship with her husband and her children are almost impossible to find. This makes one wonder whether Bourgeois' increasing recognition can be explained mainly by the evolving feminist ideas of her time. If not so, how much of her female and artistic persona can account for her increasing visibility?

A significant majority of the literature on Bourgeois repeats or explains further the psychoanalytic discourse that the artist herself puts forth about her life. This trend is

⁹ Lippard, Lucy R. "Louise Bourgeois: From the Inside Out". *Artforum*, March 1975, p.33.

certainly not a coincidence since the artist's narrative about her life is structured and seemingly exhaustive, not leaving much room for outside interpretations.

Interestingly enough, Jerry Gorovy, the artist's primary assistant since the 80s, claims that "[Bourgeois'] whole body of work is like a self-portrait."¹⁰ As revealed by Gorovy, it is indeed not easy to understand how Bourgeois' life can be distinguished from her art. Other than her art being autobiographical, directly influenced by the events of her life, the reason why Bourgeois' life is hard to separate from her art is the way she constructs and controls a particular narrative about the two.

To begin with, the artist's marriage to Goldwater placed her in a very powerful network in New York's art world. In the documentary titled *The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine*,¹¹ Bourgeois talks about how as a wife, she had to attend her academician husband's social activities and throw dinner parties in her house to accommodate his friends. It is no doubt that in these events, despite being a foreigner, female and an artist, Bourgeois was in contact with many intellectuals. Her recollections of those relationships however are not positive:

Because of the profession and personality of my husband, I lived among those people [museum trustees]...Because I was French and kind of discreet, they tolerated me...But they refused to help me professionally. The trustees of MoMA were not interested in a young woman coming from Paris.¹²

Even though Bourgeois claims that her husband's connections did not serve her in the art scene, in her *Guardian* column art critic Germain Greer disagrees:

When she married Goldwater and went to live with him in New York, she found herself at the center of the American art establishment. In 1941, Barr persuaded a donor to buy her sculpture *Quarantania* for MoMA and in 1969 it was illustrated in Goldwater's "What Is Modern Sculpture?"... Her relationship with her academic husband, who was curator of the Rockefeller collection of primitive art, not only allowed her to handle some of the most charismatic objects...it also brought her into close contact with artists who had fled occupied Europe, such as Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, André Breton and Joan Miró.¹³

¹⁰ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008, 33. minute

¹¹ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008.

¹² Bourgeois, Louise, Marie-Laure Bernadac, and Hans-Ulrich Obrist. *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of the Father: Writings and Interviews, 1923-1997*. London: Violette, 1998, p.165-166.

¹³ Greer, Germaine. "Louise Bourgeois's Greatest Creation Was the Contradictory Story of Her Life." *The Guardian - Art & Design*, 6 June 2010, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/jun/06/louise-bourgeois. Accessed 11 January 2016.

As Greer detects, despite the snobbishness of the New York art scene, Goldwater's profession and his connections helped Bourgeois have some visibility in the art world. Although Bourgeois often emphasized her dislike of the "father figures" of France, the above-mentioned surrealists, and the difficulty of being noticed as a foreign female artist in the U.S., it is no doubt that her career would not unfold as it did had she not had a prominent and active art historian husband.

Other than Greer's research, it is hard to find evidence of Goldwater's effect on Bourgeois' career. In her interviews included in the compilation by Bernadac and Obrist¹⁴, Bourgeois rarely mentions her husband. Even when probed on the subject, she shortly comments how all they talked about with her husband was the historical aspect of art, which she appreciated but had enough of. To the question of "what effect has her married life had on her work", she gives the mere answer: "There has been an interaction between the two".¹⁵

Her tendency to avoid talking about her husband may be in order to emphasize other aspects of her life. In fact, Bourgeois' detailed narration of her own life is noted and problematized by several writers. Before illustrating these critiques, the way Bourgeois appeared in the media needs to be described in detail.

1.4. Self-Narration and Its Discontents

A primary and possibly the most sensationalist case of Bourgeois' self-narration is her article titled "*Child Abuse: A Project by Louise Bourgeois*" published in *Artforum* in December 1982. It is important to note that the artist's retrospective at MoMA opened on November 6, 1982. The month after her big opening, while she was still a popular topic in the art scene, Bourgeois decided to write a mini-novel including photos of her provocative sculptures and blissful frames from her childhood, along with short statements about her past. Following a black and white photograph of young Louise and her nanny riding a boat by the river, it reads:

¹⁴ Bourgeois, Bernadac, and Obrist, 1998.

¹⁵ *ibid.*, p.95.

How is it that in a middle-class family a mistress was a standard piece of furniture? Well, the reason is that my mother tolerated it and that is the mystery....So what role do I play in this game? I am a pawn. Sadie is supposed to be there as my teacher and actually you, mother, are using me to keep track of your husband. This is child abuse.¹⁶

Bourgeois was 71 years old when she published this project. Between 1952 and 1966, she underwent psychoanalysis, and continued occasionally until 1984. What we read is an adult-child's aestheticized rage against her late mother and father, and a reflection on her long-past helplessness as a child. Is it not peculiar that she clings on to a heavy memory such as this one? And if psychoanalysis did not help her in processing frustrations from her childhood, what could? Bourgeois seems to answer this question at the end of her text:

Everyday you have to abandon your past or accept it and then if you cannot accept it you become a sculptor.¹⁷ (lack of punctuation is original)

After her first comprehensive show at a museum, Bourgeois appears to have felt the need to justify her artistic practice with her life and traumas. She claimed that sculpting was the only way she could handle her past. In an article from 1999, art historian Anne Wagner problematizes the narration provided by the artist:

In the case of Bourgeois this has made for an almost unprecedented opportunity for self-authorship: she herself has plotted, cast, rehearsed and illustrated with a documentarist's fervor a familial drama of abuses and derelictions, from which script, it is then inevitably assumed, her art must necessarily be said to have been derived.¹⁸

Wagner underlines the possibility that the artist's account is constructed, bent and rewritten from a particular standpoint. She also believes that the certainty in the narrative constrains, rather than supplements the experience of the artwork. She urges all writers who pick up on and unquestioningly accept the artist's account to question whether these narratives really matter for the work. She also asks them to challenge the artist on the purpose of her explanations. It can be said that Wagner tries to free Bourgeois' works from the artist herself, and the artistic persona she frames them with.

The critic Greer also notices how, despite her old age, Bourgeois holds on to the position of a little girl and takes advantage of it: "Bourgeois came to artistic maturity long after motherhood, widowhood and menopause. On the brink of old age, she became as a

¹⁶ Bourgeois, Louise. "Child Abuse: A Project by Louise Bourgeois." *Artforum*, Dec. 1982, pp. 44

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p.47.

¹⁸ Wagner, Anne M. "Bourgeois Prehistory, or the Ransom of Fantasies." *Oxford Art Journal*, No. 22, 1999, pp. 5. www.jstor.org/stable/1360632.

child again, free to reinvent herself and her world.”¹⁹ It is not clear why Bourgeois would want to recreate her world when she is at the peak of her career after years of struggle without appreciation and confine her work to a simplified trauma narration.

According to Wagner, this determined attitude of the artist does not benefit her art. “The revelation may or may not ‘explain’ the art, but it sure snaps the dossier on Miss Bourgeois closed before it could be fully opened.”²⁰ The way Bourgeois reveals all there is to know about her life, and thus her art, limits the possible interpretations of her oeuvre in the long run. The artist’s own psychoanalytic reading of her work not only leaves certain aspects of her works in the dark, but also perpetuates an unchanging and constructed narrative about them – something no contemporary artist today would desire.

Influential art historian Griselda Pollock criticizes the psychoanalytical and biographic trend that Bourgeois encourages:

The problem with psychobiography which has in recent years progressively afflicted the slightly enlarging field of Louise Bourgeois studies is that it is both bad art history and bad psychoanalysis...The recent psychoanalytically informed readings of Louise Bourgeois' work, as well as the reductionist psychobiographical trend are but two faces of the evidence that we stand today a good way down an already long history of the co-emergence of modern art and of psychoanalysis.²¹

Pollock questions the methods of art history and the extent of psychoanalytical inferences a historian should make. In the case of Bourgeois however, Pollock claims that too much reading into the psychology of the artist ends up undermining both disciplines.

For an art historian, Bourgeois’ history is a challenging one to retell because the artist draws a life story that does not evolve and is in a continuum throughout her life. Wye, the curator of Bourgeois’ 1994 MoMA retrospective, states that “It is not unusual for Bourgeois to come across an artwork made fifty years before, recognize in it emotions that are still vivid, and resume working on it as if not a day had passed.”²²

The artist’s tendency to control what should be written about her life and art is in fact prevalent in many aspects of her life. In 1982, for the catalogue of her first MoMA retrospective, she decided to get her portrait taken by the popular and controversial artist

¹⁹ Greer, 2010.

²⁰ Wagner, 1999, p.8.

²¹ Pollock, Griselda. “To Inscribe in the Feminine: A Kristevan Impossibility? or Femininity, Melancholy and Sublimation.” *Parallax*, vol. 4, no. 3, 1998, p. 88 doi:10.1080/135346498250136.

²² Wye, 1994, pp. 17.

Robert Mapplethorpe. Sensationalized with his pornographic photos of S&M and gay culture in the 70s, Mapplethorpe later began gaining acceptance in the art world. He eventually became an expensive and highly sought-after portrait photographer. Mapplethorpe, who was known for directing his subjects with subtle hand gestures until he achieved the perfect pose, described Bourgeois as a “surreal figure” to whom you could not say much to.²³ Bourgeois, on the other hand, brought one of her sculptures (a 40-centimeter long phallic *Fillette* sculpture) to the photo shoot that day. She explains her motivations:

I thought it was going to be a catastrophe and I prepared for it. I could not imagine what could go wrong, but I knew everything could go wrong if I was not prepared. So even though I travel light, I did take a piece of mine.²⁴

Bourgeois also confesses that she chose Mapplethorpe for his controversial position, his “objectionable, sexual representations,” and that a provocative image as hers would fit in his portfolio. Both with her choice of Mapplethorpe for the connotation of his brand name and the props she brought to the photo shoot, it is apparent that Bourgeois was consciously constructing and controlling her public image.

Bourgeois’ unwavering control of her public visibility and the difficulty of separating her art and life due to prevalent psycho-biographical discourses on her art, causes the artist to remain an enigma. It makes one wonder about the nature of the artistic persona she has pushed forward after becoming popular.

1.5. Bourgeois and the Rise of the Feminist Movement

Before delving into her specific works and examining the persona she constructs, it is necessary to position Bourgeois in the context of the United States in the 1970s, namely the beginning of the second-wave feminist movement. Starting with the end of 1960s, the feminist and the LGBT movement was on the rise in New York City.

²³ Mc Ateer, Susan. “Louise Bourgeois, Robert Mapplethorpe 1982, Printed 1991.” *Tate.org*, Feb. 2013, www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mapplethorpe-louise-bourgeois-ar00215/text-summary. Accessed. 7 Mar. 2016. Also available in: Arena - Robert Mapplethorpe. Directed by Nigel Finch, BBC, 1988, “Louise Bourgeois on Mapplethorpe.” www.youtube.com/watch?v=FX5XGfzRtkQ. Accessed 1 Mar. 2016

²⁴ *ibid.*

Unlike the first-wave feminists, who were mainly concerned with women's right to vote, new generation feminists were fighting for social rights, such as equality in the workplace and at home. As expected, the art world was not exempt from this uprising. Female artists were fighting to be represented equally, with the same terms as male artists. There were collective exhibitions by female artists; the most notable is *Womanhouse*, started by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro in 1972.²⁵

A month-long exhibition/workshop consisted of installations and performances acted out in a surreally decorated house (walls were covered with boob-like shapes and sunny-side up egg shapes were attached on the kitchen ceiling) where several women lived together and did house chores. The aim was to emphasize the amount of time women were forced to spend doing domestic work. The artwork had more of a consciousness-raising purpose for female artists, and helped to collectively think about a way to be a woman and an artist at the same time. It allowed for a dialogue for women to talk about their experiences and grievances.

"Body-art", using the female body as the medium, started and became widespread in the 70s. Carolee Schneeman, Hannah Wilke, Kiki Smith, Ana Mendieta, Martha Rosler and George O'Keefe are some of the artists that emphasized the female body and its confinement in their art. Schneeman's performance titled *Interior Scroll* (1975), in which the artist read a scroll that she pulled out from her vagina, remains one of the principal feminist works from this era. In addition to claiming the female body as a sacred source of knowledge, the performance also confronted the viewers with the raw and taboo aspects of the female body.

Renowned art historian Linda Nochlin's seminal article titled *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?* also falls in this decade. Written in 1971, the year of Bourgeois' first retrospective, the article explicates the systematic reasons in the education system and social norms that preclude women from achieving great artistic success. Nochlin simply points out that, it had been practically impossible for women to compete with male artists, since they had not even been allowed to study art. When they *were* admitted to schools (and very few of them were granted this right), they were not allowed to draw from nude models, which left them at a significant disadvantage compared to their

²⁵ "Womanhouse." Womanhouse. NYFA, 2009. Web. Accessed. 10 Jan. 2017. <http://www.womanhouse.net/>

male counterparts. Nochlin urged female artists of her time to remember this injustice and be conscious of it.²⁶

Alongside this activism and consciousness-raising efforts, women were also trying to affect the psychological theory written on women. They came together in houses for feminist reading groups. Writings of French psychoanalytic feminist authors such as Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva had become very popular in the United States in this decade. Female artists organized reading nights where they would empower each other through anti-phallogocentric critiques of Freud and Lacan. Infuriated by the phallogocentric psychoanalytic theory, these women were trying to find a way to write and think about an authentic female subject.

Even though Bourgeois was undergoing psychoanalysis herself, she did not join such readings. In a selection of her statements, Bourgeois confessed: “Freud and Lacan did nothing for the artist. They were barking up the wrong tree. They don’t help any. I simply can’t use them.”²⁷ Although she herself mentioned her frustrations about the male authority figures of psychoanalysis, Bourgeois looked for the answer elsewhere and did not join a collective movement.

Bourgeois used many aspects of the female body in her art, and used her own experiences as inspiration; nevertheless, she never wanted to be associated with the feminist movement. Her work was never explicitly activist, nor openly confrontational. Even though her fame took off in the same decade as the second-wave feminist movement, she was from another generation and maintained her distance with her American colleagues. Despite Bourgeois’ stance, American feminist artists, namely the artist group Guerrilla Girls, confessed that they were inspired by the feminist aspects of Bourgeois’ art.²⁸ As the following sections of this research shows, it is not unusual for Bourgeois to utter something but mean something else. We have enough evidence to believe that she discussed feminist themes in her works despite not wanting to be labelled a feminist.

²⁶ Nochlin, Linda. *Women, Art, and Power: And Other Essays*. New York: Harper & Row, 1989, pp.147-158.

²⁷ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p. 229.

²⁸ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008.

2. TANGERINES AND THE *ORANGE PERIOD*: THE ORIGINS OF THE GENDER QUESTION

The story of oranges/tangerines* has a long history in Bourgeois' life. There are several instances in her interviews and documentaries where she tells an anecdote about her father who used to entertain guests by performing a trick with a tangerine peel. His joke humiliated the artist as a child, and left a mark even until her old age. After watching a poignant moment on oranges in Bourgeois' latest documentary, by Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach (2008), I was compelled to search for the origins and the effects of this story. I encountered several similar anecdotes in her earlier interviews and some artworks on this subject from the 1990s. There were three different documentary moments of Bourgeois acting out the story, and two different collages with cut-out and dried tangerine peels attached on paper.

What makes this memory of the tangerine so interesting can be explained in two parts. First, this moment from the artist's childhood can be considered as the primal memory reverberating from her familial life. The folds of this memory guide one on Bourgeois' contestation of the notions of gender, and her efforts to redefine it through art. The artist's continuous interest in this story shows that, even until her last years, she was occupied with the question of what it is to be a woman, or a man, or whether it is even possible to be one without the other.

Second, the eternal return of this story in the artist's narrative and her lively enactment of it in different decades, show that Bourgeois performs and simultaneously builds a particular artistic persona. This persona, in which she is often the victim, gives her the opportunity to explain her works in a certain way and push the audience to question the notions of gender.

2.1. Two Documentaries

* When recounting the same story, Bourgeois sometimes mentions "oranges", and at other times she changes to "tangerines".

In the most recent documentary on Louise Bourgeois from 2008, we see a very old Bourgeois who, at the end of telling the tangerine story, cannot hold her tears. The documentary titled "*Louise Bourgeois: The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine*" is directed by art critic Amei Wallach and filmmaker Marion Cajori. It stands as a unique example among biographical artist films since its filming and production took more than 14 years. As told by Cajori in a major screening event in Garage Museum in Russia, the film began just before Bourgeois was going to represent the United States at the Venice Biennial.²⁹ When she decided to shoot a film about her participation in the biennial, the funding was almost impossible to raise because the artist, who was 70 at the time, did not have any collectors. Since the team could not raise enough money to document her piece in the show, the movie developed into a long and open-ended process, in which the earlier films were kept in storage for years. In this film, we see a uniquely emotional and powerful retelling of Bourgeois' memory.

Even though we do not know exactly which year the particular clip was shot, we see from the artist's appearance that she is quite fragile-looking and old. The scene starts with Bourgeois acting the way her father used to draw a figure on a tangerine. She uses a black marker to draw a figure on an unpeeled fruit starting with the breasts and the hips. As she draws, she says "This is my father's works of art, not mine." She then traces the drawing with a razor to make slits. Finally, she lifts up the peel and the figure comes out. As she lifts the peel, she draws attention to the navel of the fruit, which corresponds to the supposed sexual organ of the figure. We see the protruding white inner peel of the tangerine in front of the figure's hips. Bourgeois explains how her father would say that contrary to the tangerine figure, her daughter does not have "anything there". "My daughter does not exhibit such beauty, the little creature is just a girl," she recounts.

Bourgeois continues the story by telling how everyone would laugh at her after her father's remarks. Her tears well up and she cries, confessing how mad she is at her father. "After 50 years, the thing is so vivid, as it happened yesterday," she says with tears knotting in her throat. With the voice of a vulnerable young girl, she continues to talk about kids who cry at night because they have nothing else to do about their unhappiness. She then

²⁹ Amei Wallach at Garage. *Louise Bourgeois: The Spider, the Mistress and the Tangerine*. Garage Museum, 6 Apr. 2016, www.youtube.com/watch?v=gSLaw39Twzw. Accessed 1 August 2016.

gets up and leaves the room, leaving the interviewers alone with their cameras.³⁰

From this story, we infer that Bourgeois' father would make fun of her daughter for not having a penis and for being "just a girl". He would express his frustration or lack of love for his daughter by using an irrelevant and absurd prop. The artist seems not to be able to pardon her father for his joke years later and even after his death.

Even though Bourgeois tells this story many times before, this is the first time she cries in front of the camera. The reason why she feels comfortable enough to cry may be because of the extensive period of the shootings, during which the directors were able to develop a trusting relationship with her. As a result, she becomes very intimate with them at times. In one of those intimate moments, we see a distinctly emotional retelling of the story of her father's tangerine. Alternatively, the reason for her emotional state may be her age. In this retelling of the story, Bourgeois appears in her oldest stage.

In an earlier documentary from 1993 by French director Camille Guichard, the artist retells the story with a cooler tone, and in her native language this time. She tells how his father learned this trick in the trenches of World War I. She explains how, out of boredom and fear, the soldiers would play a lot of games, and that her father became very good at chess and several card games. We find out that it is during this period that he learned this game with oranges. Bourgeois again performs the anecdote by cutting out a previously drawn figure on an orange with a razor, demonstrating the big breasts and the hips. She continues by taking the peel off. She performs the story as her father had done. In French, Bourgeois enacts the excitement in her father's voice when showing the inside of the orange peel: "Look my children, it's super! Look what's here. I don't need to tell you that this little figure is my daughter. Not of Henriette [Bourgeois's older sister], but a small figure of Louisson [the way her father calls her]. And I completely failed because it is useless to say that Louise has nothing there. I regret - but it is a mistake."³¹ Bourgeois shows the camera the white pulp of the orange that resembles an erect penis.

She comments on her father: "He made a very cruel comment on children's sexuality." She continues to confess that it had an effect on her. Because her father cruelly

³⁰ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008, 1.17.00 – 1.21.00 minute

³¹ *Louise Bourgeois: Un Film De Camille Guichard*. Directed by Camille Guichard, TERRA LUNA FILMS - Centre Geroges Pompidou, 1993. 07.00-09.02 minute. Translation from French done by Lesli Jebahar. Also available in: *Louise Bourgeois: Un Film De Camille Guichard*. Directed by Camille Guichard, TERRA LUNA FILMS - Centre Geroges Pompidou, 1993, www.youtube.com/watch?v=cjho_BJ2KsE.

made so much fun of her, she tried to destroy her father in many of her works. And she says it was a true story that went down in history, since her work has been exhibited in a museum. She refers to her work titled “*Destruction of the Father*” which was shown at an exhibition and will be examined in this paper separately.

In this older excerpt, we see a relatively younger Bourgeois. She is still elderly, but a few years younger than she is in the documentary completed in 2008 as can be understood from her skin and posture. She does not cry after she finishes telling the story. She becomes emotional and upset, but she disperses the emotion by producing a short laughter and skipping onto a new subject.

In this version, she interacts with a filmmaker from her native country, where, in a sense, she fled from when she was young. One can argue that she wants to put on a stronger façade towards a male French director who would represent her at home, who had the capacity to show France that “she made it”. One can also argue that at the time, the memory was still very active in Bourgeois’ psyche. For this reason, she may be cutting the story short in order to suppress it, whereas in the more recent version, she allows the memory to surface with all its entailing emotions.

2.2. Collages with Peels

If we wind back just a couple of years ago from this documentary, we encounter two collages that Bourgeois made with orange peels dating in 1990. While one of the works is left untitled, the other one is titled “*Orange Period*”. Presented in Lawrence Rinder’s *Drawings and Observations*, a compilation of Bourgeois’ drawings with her comments written next to them, this work has light blue and white background. A dried orange peel is stitched on it from four different parts. The peel resembles an abstract figure of a person. The details of the feet, the narrowing down of the legs, and the heels of the shoes give us clues about the sex of the figure. We also see an extension reaching out from its hips.

(Img. 1)



Img 1: *Orange Episode*, 1990

Next to the reproduced image, we see Bourgeois’ comments. Instead of watching

her recorded visual interviews, we read about the same anecdote this time, yet we do not know the exact year when her lines were recorded. Interestingly enough, her written account is almost identical to what she performed in the documentaries. She emphasizes that this work has to do with her father's macho humour:

The humour of a teasing father. I had a father who was very macho and after every meal...just for the sake of adding insult to the injury, everyone was supposed to sing a song...or make a fool of themselves. Being the president master, he [her father] would make what he thought was jokes. That is to say he was making fun of his daughter. He had another daughter, but for reasons of his own, he picked on me.³²

She explains how his father would draw the figure's head, breast, and belly. She writes:

When my father pulled the skin off, something would protrude from the navel and he would say, 'Well you see I was trying to make a portrait of my daughter but to my surprise look what comes out. I don't have to tell you that with such a beautiful thing, it is not my daughter.'³³

The explanation ends with Bourgeois admitting how humiliated she was by her father's macho sense of humor.

In this written account, we hear the same story only with some of the minor details left out. We read Bourgeois' frustration and how hurt she was because of her father's insensibilities. We hear about a father who devises a plan to make fun of her daughter's lack of penis, as if that were something to lack, or a prize that some are deprived of. He comments on the fact that the figure's possession of a protruding navel is "beautiful", while her daughter's lack of it is something to be pitied.

In the other paper work from the same year, we see a slimmer figure made out of a dried fruit peel. The sex of the figure is less obvious in this one, since the feet are not detailed and there are no heels. The placement of the fruit's navel, however, corresponds more closely with where the actual organ is supposed to be. The peel is placed on a dark brown background and the figure is attached to the surface with several pins. Different from the *Orange Period*, which seemed more similar to simply preserved peels of interesting shape, this untitled work reminds one of a crucifixion of an abstract figure or a voodoo doll with needles. Unlike the former, this one is pinned from the further ends of the limbs. The figure appears more similar to the skinned outer body of a hunted animal,

³² Rinder, Lawrence, and Louise Bourgeois. *Louise Bourgeois: Drawings*. Berkley, University of California, 1996, p.164-165

³³ Rinder, 1996, p. 164-165

displayed in all its helplessness, beaten flat on the paper. (Img. 2)



Img 2: *Untitled*, 1990

Not included in Rinder's compilation, this image is featured in an article written by the critic Frédérique Joseph-Lowry, who comments on the presentation of this work in the Guggenheim catalogue:

The tangerine-skin silhouette was presented in the Guggenheim catalogue...cited to illustrate the various sculptural materials (from latex to fabric) which the artist used! A child, peeled alive in her father's hands and mouth in a symbolic rendering of a new *écorchée vive* [tormented soul] by her progenitor, is certainly not comparable to wood, plaster, marble... If there is a new medium which Bourgeois used, it's her perception of herself as a child, woven and unraveled in emotion.³⁴

In her heated article, Lowry draws attention to the physical act of peeling and its symbolisms. Just as in these paper works I described, Bourgeois' father skins her daughter alive each time he tells the story. He peels off her skin only to find out that she is not the one he is looking for. To him, the fruit's peel is not a portrait of Bourgeois because she does not have penis. As his drawing of Louise's portrait with a fruit comes to end, he sighs "I completely failed because it is useless to say that Louise has nothing there. I regret - but it is a mistake."³⁵

From Bourgeois' account, we infer that for one reason or another, her father is not happy with his daughter. If we take her father's words literally, we can interpret that he prefers a son instead of Louise. Yet, we do not have any findings in Bourgeois' accounts

³⁴ Joseph-Lowry, Frédérique. "Through The Eye Of A Needle." *Artnet Magazine*, N/A
www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/lowery/louise-bourgeois6-15-10.asp. Accessed 11 March 2016.

³⁵ Guichard, 1993, 07.00-09.02 minute.

about the reasons of her father's particular dislike of her. She does not give us much insight, but rather repeats the same narrative, which does not leave any room for different interpretations of the story either.

If we dig into her father's joke, he starts out by claiming that he will make a portrait of her daughter. When the fruit's navel appears, he says this cannot be Louise because she does not have a penis. In reality, he emphasizes the fact that the portrait and Louise's body do not correspond to each other. Though it maybe far-fetched, there may be other ways of interpreting this anecdote differently than what the artist simply recounts. The portrait *is* of Louise, but Louise does not have a penis. It may mean that she "has balls", that she acts with lots of guts, while in physical reality she does not have "balls." Little Louise may in fact be acting too much like a boy even though she is a girl. This portrait might be a mean warning of a father for his inconveniently masculine daughter. It may be his way of saying that, even though her daughter does not have a penis in real life, metaphorically speaking, she has a threatening phallus.

To go back to Lowry's critique, her father does indeed eat Bourgeois alive and torment her soul. So much so that she tells this anecdote for many years to come and tries to deal with this emotion of helplessness she felt as a young girl, often using this feeling itself as an artistic medium.

Nevertheless, after 1990, Bourgeois ceases to make collages of tangerines, but begins talking about this anecdote instead. After pinning the haunting ghost of this memory down in her works, she talks about it on several occasions. The fact that she does not preserve tangerine peels in such a way and begins talking about the story shows a change in her psychology. It may well be the sign of improvement, showing that she can now maintain a conversation about a profoundly disturbing subject. She mentions this story not only in her documentaries, but on other occasions as well.

2.3. Video Clip: How to Peel a Tangerine

In addition to the parts from two separate documentaries filmed in different decades, Bourgeois tells this anecdote in yet another clip. Though the video's date is

unspecified, we see an elderly Bourgeois in front of the camera whose mouth moves and shakes due to old age and weakness. As this is a short clip and we do not have the access to the beginning of the scene, we are only shown the moment when Bourgeois seems to be answering a specific question. She tells the tangerine story with a very matter-of-fact and dutiful attitude, as if the interviewer on the other side of the camera has asked her to describe how to peel a tangerine.

After explaining the family tradition in her house, she starts drawing on the tangerine. She demonstrates the two navels of the tangerine, which, she notes, are very important for the story she will tell. As she draws a little figure on the fruit, she utters the words “neck, breasts, and the sex – very important- legs, calf and feet.” She begins peeling off the figure, raises her voice in an alarming tone and asks suddenly “Are you looking now? It’s the important part. The lifting, the extracting.” She performs the story as an experienced story-teller who knows how to control her audience and build up to the climax. “This little figure,” she says “is more interesting than she appears to be.” She explains how this was addressed to her in front of everybody at the dinner table and how she would “blush and die on the spot.”³⁶

Despite the fact that she feels emotional and that anger seems to build up in her when talking about her father’s “despicable” humour, the entire crew and Bourgeois laugh at the end of the clip. She laughs because she is happy to be able to tell this anecdote successfully. She notes that sometimes the navel of the fruits does not exist and the figure does not appear the way it should. She is happy for finding the right tangerine with an appropriate navel, and the crew is happy for being able to get this well-known story out of their famous subject. At the end, the whole crew laughs *with* her. She makes fun of her father at an entertainment show this time. Having in a sense exorcised her father in drawings and other works, Bourgeois is now able to talk and laugh about this memory.

Although throughout her life the artist seems to have found a way to deal with this memory, towards the end of her life, she cannot help but go back to her “perception of herself as a child,” to borrow Lowry’s words. Her career is filled with works featuring figures of a *sui generis* gender, in which the simple possession or non-possession of a penis and/or breasts does not define masculinity or femininity. Her figures do not cease to confuse and create questions.

³⁶ Louise Bourgeois - Peels a Tangerine. *ZCZ Films*, 17 Feb. 2013, www.youtube.com/watch?v=M2mx1gZqh1E

“I was not a man, I was only a woman who didn’t have anything there,” says Bourgeois at the end of her anecdote in the clip.³⁷ This simple sentence is very symbolic for Bourgeois. Her art, and especially her works examined in this thesis, shows that a woman does not need to physically possess a penis to have masculine attributes, or simply possessing a penis does not exempt one from “femininity.”

I believe Bourgeois’ preoccupations with the notion and complexity of gender began with her father’s mocking. They did not only affect her self-esteem as a young girl, but also caused her a lot of emotional disturbance about her own gender. The figure *Untitled* (1990) can be interpreted as a representation of Bourgeois’ gender. In the image, the figure lies flat, seeming to have been beaten down and surrendered. Her gender is subjected to other people’s interpretations and already existing definitions. This work, created at a relatively later time in her career, shows Bourgeois’ preoccupations with her own identity. Her whole career can be interpreted as her struggle to redefine gender, which was undermined by her father.

While the artist performs more of a vengeance-seeking, grudge-holding victimized daughter, this persona softens towards the end of her life. What one may call a frustrated adolescent turns into a vulnerable little daughter. This persona both fuels the art and excuses it, giving the complete power over the works to the artist herself.

³⁷ ZCZ Films, 2013.

3. MAPPLETHORPE AND *LA FILETTE*

If Bourgeois performs a frustrated daughter with the tangerines, then her renowned portrait taken by Robert Mapplethorpe with her *La Fillette* could very well be thought of as the second part of that act. In this part, she almost gets back at her father with a joke of her own. The reason why I read this photograph as Bourgeois' performance is because, despite being taken by Mapplethorpe, it stands as a self-portrait in which the photographer did not have agency and Bourgeois determined the frame. **(Img 3)**



Img 3: Louise Bourgeois by Robert Mapplethorpe, 1982

The prominent portrait of the artist is arguably the first one that comes to mind when one thinks of Bourgeois. The widely circulated black and white photo was taken in 1982 for the exhibition catalogue of Bourgeois' retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art, New York.³⁸ In the photo, there is an unusually amused Louise. She faces the camera straight on with her characteristic wrinkles and she wears a relaxed, mischievous smile. Her hair is tied at the back; either collars or a neckerchief covers her neck. She is wearing a black fur coat whose mohair is reminiscent of gorillas. As one scans down the portrait, the source of her mischief appears through the fur: she holds a sculpture of an erect penis under her right arm, which is one of her earlier works named *La Fillette* (in French: *little girl*). She supports the tip of the penis with her thumb and index finger. The hard sculpture is made of plaster and latex, and stands like a captured trophy under her arm.

As remarked by several writers³⁹, Bourgeois' gesture on the tip of the organ, the way she seems to tickle it, has an air of threat.

There are so many oddities to this image and Bourgeois' own comments make it even odder. Even though her piece in the photo looks explicitly like a phallus symbol, in one of her interviews on this piece, she objects:

But it is not a phallus. It is what people say, and what people say and what is, is completely different. I brought in fact a little fillette - means a petit fille. It gives me security and I brought this...big kind of doll. - [sic].⁴⁰

When asked about her grin in the photo, Bourgeois says she smiles because she knew people were going to interpret *La Fillette* as erotic. She explains that she is used to her art being called erotic and that this interpretation manifests in the eyes of the beholder.

There are several claims in Bourgeois' perplexing answer. First, she calls what is art-historically acknowledged as a phallus figure her "doll". (Notice the word choice, which mostly connotes to a child's toy rather than a figurine.)

She insinuates the fact that she acts like "a little girl" by taking her doll with her to a stranger's studio to help her feel comfortable. She then admits to deliberately choosing an object that people would interpret as erotics. Even though she aims to provoke her audience and succeeds, she evades taking responsibility. She insists that her figurine is in fact a *little girl* and the ones who see it as a phallic symbol do it at their own discretion.

³⁸ Mc Ateer, Susan. "Robert Mapplethorpe - Louise Bourgeois." Tate.org, Feb. 2013, www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mapplethorpe-louise-bourgeois-ar00215. Accessed 4 April 2016.

As revealed from her tense laughter in the video clip cited above, Bourgeois enjoys teasing her audience. As an artist, she claims to create her own language and signifiers when in fact she uses the most charged ones. One can suggest that like all other artists, Bourgeois has the right to create her own language. However, we see that she gets trapped in the customary meanings of words and symbols. She plays with her audience by relying on the customary meanings of words. In addition, even if she aims to create new signifiers, her *little girl* is charged with all the connotations of a cut-out penis.

In her earlier comments about *La Fillette* from 1968, which was displayed as a piece hanging from the ceiling, she mentions that the work related to her roles in society: a wife and a mother of three sons. **(Img 4)** “From a sexual point of view I consider the masculine attributes to be extremely delicate. They’re objects that the woman, myself, must protect.”⁴¹ Bourgeois’ experience as the caretaker of men leads her to believe that masculinity is vulnerable and frail. Yet, instead of protecting “masculinity,” she leaves it even more vulnerable by suspending it from the ceiling with a hook.



Img 4: *La Fillette*, 1968

This claim to protection also seems untrue in the portrait photo as well. She tucks the disfigured organ under her fairy arms like a successful game or kill, takes the organ

³⁹ Kuspit, and Mc Ateer (2013) both emphasize Bourgeois’ gesture

⁴⁰ Arena - Robert Mapplethorpe. Directed by Nigel Finch, BBC, 1988, “Louise Bourgeois on Mapplethorpe.” www.youtube.com/watch?v=FX5XGfzRtkQ . Accessed 1 Mar. 2016

⁴¹ Tate Museum Gallery Label. “Louise Bourgeois Fillette (Sweeter Version).” *Tate.org*, Oct. 2016, www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-fillette-sweeter-version-102885.

under her command and does not seem particularly care-taking. *La Fillette* does not seem protected in either pose. Where does the discrepancy between the works/images and the artist's comments lead us then?

Neither the regular audience, nor the more interested audience (i.e. art historians and academics) need to take the artists' words as final. One of the best ways to arrive at a more complex and rich interpretation is to dig deeper into such discrepancies. I suggest that even though the photo is taken by Mapplethorpe, who captures a skilful frame and a perfect moment to freeze the expression on Bourgeois' face, this image is a self-portrait simply because Bourgeois controls its production and the discourse on this work even after its creation.

One can rightfully argue that the photographer has the right to decide on the final version of the image. Yet the artist, both by her performance within and outside of the frame, controls the image more than the photographer himself. Mapplethorpe was a sensational photographer who was recognized for photographing black male nudes in abstractly pornographic poses and was known for his perfectionism. He was known to exhaust his models until he achieved "the perfect shot" in his mind. As briefly touched upon in the *Introduction*, when Bourgeois is asked about her experience with Mapplethorpe, she explains how she prepared for the photo shoot and took precautions of her own: "I knew that everything would go wrong if I was not prepared. Even though I travel light, I did take a piece of mine."⁴²

Similar to the discrepancy between her comments on *La Fillette* and the work itself, we see a mismatch between the actions and the decisions of Bourgeois. Given the fact that this catalogue portrait was taken for the artist's first, most comprehensive, and most important retrospective show; we can assume that she chose the photographer whom she thought would be best for the job. In fact, she admits, "I thought that it was a good collaboration because he is famous, not for his flower pictures, he is famous for his objectionable, sexual representation."⁴³ Bourgeois not only wanted to be photographed by a recognized artist, but also by someone who succeeded in making unconventionally explicit images acceptable. To her comments on Mapplethorpe, Bourgeois adds; "He is famous as a controversial artist and this photograph fitted in his album."⁴⁴ Bourgeois could

⁴² Mc Ateer, 2013.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

also be identifying with Mapplethorpe's hard-won acceptance by the art community and his persistent dedication to his art. The portfolio of Mapplethorpe and his character must have undoubtedly affected Bourgeois' decision; however, though she believes he is a good match for the job, she still thinks the whole project could go to waste if she does not take precautions. Hence, she brings her little doll. Her attempts to control her own image and that of her works are covered under the pretexts of "caution".

I argue for the opposite, that either knowingly or unknowingly, Bourgeois was aware of all the connotations of working with Mapplethorpe, directing the portrait with her props and explaining the piece to the public the way she did. Not only the prop she brought with her but also the fur coat she wore served the same narrative. **(Img 5)** Imagine



Img 5: detail of Louise Bourgeois portrait

Bourgeois holding the *La Fillette* under her arms with a thinner, unassuming jacket. Would it have the same effect on the organ? Her choice of a dark and voluminous coat adds animalism to her torso and her hand gesture. It connects the phallus to the primary, savage men, bringing to mind the savage tribes that idolize animal phalluses.

I believe this exact contrast between Bourgeois' spoken narrative and her charged appearance with the sculpture is a reflection of her denying and blurring the definitions of gender. Is she a little girl carrying her doll, or a powerful female-gorilla-goddess in possession of a primary power symbol? Instead of choosing either one, she indeed blends them in one. It is as if she asks whether a penis is enough to transform a woman into a man. In case she receives the affirmative answer, she prepares her argument: "But no, this is not a penis, it is simply a doll."

Art critic Christine Terisse interprets the image as the "penis added" version of the artist:

The portrait of Louise Bourgeois with *Fillette* (1968)...is an ironical illustration of the victory of the penis-nied [sic]: Bourgeois has managed to seize the Organ and carry it under her arm like a soft toy or a handbag. In lending herself to such an illustrated illustration of Freudian doctrine, Louise Bourgeois embraces the father of psychoanalysis, but also refers to the ritual paternal jest associated with peeling

oranges, i.e. the mortifying representation of Louise deprived of a phallic attribute.⁴⁵

Indeed this portrait could easily be connected with the tangerine stories. *La Fillette* is a penis - the penis her father was accusing her of not having. Now the 71-year old *Louisson** finally has a penis, but it no longer is a penis for her. It is a self-made object that gives her security. The Mapplethorpe portrait is, in a bizarre way, the tangerine peel come alive - a little girl *with* a penis. She is no longer mortified. She is almost made into a god, by the very man who crowned the pictures of male organs with the aesthetic license of the camera. Art historian Donald Kuspit has written extensively on this portrait of Louise Bourgeois. He compares Mapplethorpe's portrait with images of ancient Greek women carrying a giant phalluses that are regarded as "a sacred totem of fertility...thus of generative creative power of nature."⁴⁶ He writes about the symbolic meaning of a phallus image in ancient Greece and how it transformed "all the profane penises in the world into one sacred phallus."⁴⁷ He likens the classical ancient woman carrying the phallus to a virgin mother:

She [Greek Goddess] in effect copulates with herself, for the dildo has made her a man -- it's in effect her own penis. The baby she magically conceives in unconscious phantasy will be a virgin birth. Possessing the dildo -- a sovereign phallus not a humble penis... but will always remain hard (and hardy) and ready for action (no problem with impotence or indifference) -- she avoids being possessed by a man, and becomes self-possessed, as it were, that is, her own independent man.⁴⁸

Kuspit's analogy with an ancient figure of a Greek woman resonates with Bourgeois' stance. The phallus does make her a man in the metaphoric sense: she fulfils the physical requirements of being a man. The erect penis, which never goes soft, asserts her power, both her creative power and the power she finally acquires in the art world that is dominated by men who have been ignoring her for the past decades. When her blooming success and her age is taken into account, it is apt to say that she becomes her own "independent man." In 1982, Bourgeois' husband Robert Goldwater had been dead for almost a decade. For 9 years, Bourgeois had to survive on her own and toil for her artistic recognition. At the same time, at age 71, the female hormones in a woman's body start to

⁴⁵ Christine Terrisse in Joseph-Lowery.

* the diminutive that Bourgeois' father uses to call the artist

⁴⁶ Donald Kuspit. "The Phallic Woman." *Artnet Magazine*, N/A
www.artnet.com/magazineus/features/kuspit/bourgeois-the-phallic-woman11-3-10.asp. Accessed May 2016

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

decrease and sexual desires take a different form. Physiologically and mentally speaking, it is true that Bourgeois was becoming more like a man.

Kuspit goes on to suggest that by possessing of a penis, the ancient woman becomes more than a man, a hermaphrodite, “physically bisexual,” “double sexed” and suggests that “Bourgeois is a psychic hermaphrodite.” He connects her originality and creativity with the sexual myth of Aristophanes – who explains the splitting of man and woman. Kuspit’s reading of Bourgeois is heavily psychoanalytical and far-fetched, yet he points out an interesting fact about the artist. In her artistic performance, by embracing both a powerfulness that is associated with men and a fragility that is associated with young women, Bourgeois presents a different take on hermaphrodite. Instead of being born with both organs, she acquires them and unites them in an authentic self.

Since Bourgeois’ phallus holds looks so much like a point of pride for her, and that she does not at all seem to be caressing or nurturing the object but masterfully and powerfully holding it, it is possible to read it as an extension of her own body: a self-made and owned penis. As Kuspit emphasizes about *La Fillette*:

The phallus is all her own, down to every last detail, made by her hands and mind, and the photograph reveals how consciously and unconsciously it is totally her own -- how much it is a fixture of her imagination and an indispensable part of her body ego. She clearly adores her penis.⁴⁹

The penis/phallus that Bourgeois holds, both by its hand-made quality and the artist’s prideful embrace of it, can indeed be thought of as a part of her as an artist and as a woman.

Let us for one moment forget Bourgeois’ own account about feeling more secure with *La Fillette* by her side. Let us take in the importance of carrying only this object for a portrait appointment. The organ could indeed be interpreted as a part of Bourgeois. Ironically, the way this portrait is remembered as an iconic image of Bourgeois does really make the penis hers as well. It is apparent that Bourgeois has a fascination with the organ itself and the power of the symbolic meaning that the organ emulates.

As concluding the analysis on Mapplethorpe’s portrait, it is important to mention Bourgeois’ work from 1974 titled *The Destruction of the Father*. Kuspit notes that in this work Bourgeois acknowledges her hatred for her father for belittling her and for the strutting arrogance of an erect penis.⁵⁰ Yet in this “self-portrait,” she seems to be in control

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

of the masculinity symbol. After feeling humiliated and insufficient by her father's comments in her childhood, she acquires a "penis" or simply wants to go down in history as having acquired one.

The acquiring of a penis does not require her to abandon her feminine side. On the contrary, her stance as a woman rejects gender binaries. She embodies both feminine and masculine norms. Another important aspect of Bourgeois is that her gender persona is seen in her actions and in her performances. The way she chooses to pose, carry herself and explain her works all make a point about gender. As stated by writer Julie Nicoletta, "Mapplethorpe shows Bourgeois as a mature artist...searching for integration of the sexes rather than separation."⁵¹ Bourgeois' works always seek to question the dualities and present them in a novel way.

⁵¹ Nicoletta, Julie. "Louise Bourgeois's Femmes-Maisons: Confronting Lacan." *Woman's Art Journal*, ol. 13, no. 2, 1992, p. 25. doi:10.2307/1358149.

4. COSTUME FOR A BANQUET AND THE DESTRUCTION OF THE FATHER

Even though it is connected to the tangerine story, the image of the savage woman in charge of the phallus in Mapplethorpe portrait can be traced back to 1970s. The anomaly, the double-meaning and the ambiguity that Bourgeois presents in her portrait *La Filette*, is common in most of her works. Gender symbols, such as curvy hips or breasts, nipples, phallic-shaped figures or erect penises, vaginas and testicles often co-exist in the same figure and confuse the viewers. She constantly pushes the boundaries of our perception of gender and brings together what seemingly opposite images. In this chapter, I examine several works of Bourgeois from this period, mainly *Costume for a Banquet* (1978) and *Destruction of the Father* (1974), to further demonstrate the development of this gender ambiguity in her artistic practice.



Img 6: Louise Bourgeois wearing AVENZA costume, 1975

A photograph of Bourgeois, shot in 1975, in front of her house in New York City, captures her posing by looking away from the camera, wearing her latex sculpture titled *Avenza*. **(Img 6)** Created in 1969, the latex sculpture consists of large and round protuberances of various sizes. They look like a collection of large breasts or an enlarged view of a group of warts. This sculpture/costume encourages a rich variety of commentary and it speaks to several works both preceding and succeeding it.

In 1978, this costume became a part of Bourgeois' room-sized installation titled *Confrontation* exhibited at Hamilton Gallery.⁵² Accompanying her installation about the necessity of confronting oneself and being able to accept oneself in the presence of others, Bourgeois organized a "banquet" or, as curator Nancy Spector said, she "choreographed a fashion show performance."

In Guichard's documentary, Bourgeois is asked about this photograph and the work. She answers simply:

[This is] a piece of show off. I'm delighted to have all these, let's call them mammaries...breasts. I made them big and lots of them. I know men like that. They told me. I put that cloak on. If you look at the expression on my face, I'm delighted.⁵³



Img 7: Statue of Diane of Ephesus

In this short and simple account, the artist makes several claims. She says she is happy to have these breasts. She knows that men like them. She is showing off the fact that she has several breasts. She also adds that the sculpture is a "cloak." However, it is not clear what exactly about these "breasts" is making Bourgeois happy. She must be happy to perplex her audience. Is she happy to have them because they symbolize motherhood, fertility and creativity; or is she happy because men find them attractive? Is it a coincidence that she uses "cloak," a word that conveys a sense of hiding and disguise? By putting on this sculpture, is she showing her actual lack of breasts, or her desire to have more of all the things that comes with it?

This costume reminds one of the statute of "Diana of Ephesus," the all-powerful goddess of creation symbolized by an abundance of

⁵² Dover, Caitlin. "Performing Confrontation." Tate.org, 7 Apr. 2014, www.guggenheim.org/blogs/checklist/performing-confrontation. Accessed 3 August 2016.

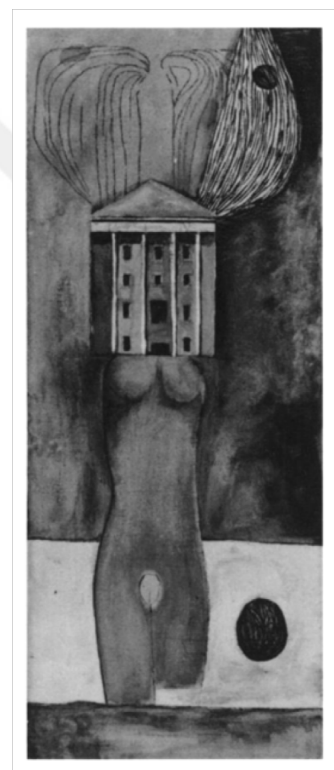
⁵³ Guichard, 1993, 40.00 minute.

breasts. **(Img 7)** As Kuspit mentions in his article, Diana’s godly authority and the respect she gains comes from her forty breasts and the bull testicles she has attached to her statue.⁵⁴ The tradition of emphasizing fertility and the creative powers of female figures by multiplying the number of breasts is surely not new. Yet, I believe Bourgeois does not simply want to declare herself a female goddess by putting the costume on. She may want to point out the simple logic of equating breasts with women and play on society’s simplistic reductions. In the performance of *Confrontation*, she may be trying to confront her “femaleness” that is attached to her in a limiting way by society.

Her performance with the costume in front of the camera differs a lot from Mapplethorpe’s *La Fillette*, which is also read as a personification of an ancient goddess, among other things. Compared to her presence, position of power and control in the Mapplethorpe photo, Bourgeois seems rather passive and even confined in her breast costume.

To better illustrate her confinement by this costume, perhaps one has to go further back and examine her *Femme-maison* painting series. **(Img 8)** (*Femme-maison* translates to “housewife” in French and literally, it means “woman house”). In this series, Bourgeois shows women whose naked bodies are partly shaped as a house and explores the relationship between domesticity and female identity.⁵⁵ In her article, art historian Nicoletta focuses on Bourgeois’ *Femme-Maison* series from 1945-47. In one of Bourgeois’ paintings, in which a naked female figure’s head is replaced by an image of a house, and she seems to be standing in front of an empty wall. Regarding this particular work, Nicoletta argues;

Although the upper part of the woman’s body and the building blend into the background...no arms are evident and the legs are cut off at the knees, reducing the figure to a fragmented torso and adding to the feeling of dependence or lack of freedom. Here Bourgeois presents the female body as an object – a prisoner not only of her home or domestic sphere but also of her sexuality.⁵⁶



Img 8: *Femme-Maison* (1945-47)

⁵⁴ Kuspit.

⁵⁵ “Louise Bourgeois Retrospective: Room 1.” Tate.org, www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/louise-bourgeois/room-guide/louise-bourgeois-room-1.

⁵⁶ Nicoletta, 1992, p.22-23

Despite the fact that Nicoletta closely examines a much earlier work, her comments resonate with the *Avenza* costume. Unlike the painting, Bourgeois' head and feet are still visible in the photo, yet her arms disappear under the cloak. She turns into a small-headed figure with a large-breasted torso. The costume fragments her body, leaving only her head and a short portion of her feet exposed. By cloaking her actual torso, the costume turns her female body into an object. Though she may still have the ability to walk and move, she cannot grasp objects (such as her own sculpture *La Filette*) since she lacks arms. Can we not say that by putting on this sculpture Bourgeois becomes "a prisoner not only of her home or domestic sphere, but also of her sexuality"? From her comments on a later print, we can infer that Bourgeois positively regards the nourishing and motherly aspect of odder-like looking big breasts.⁵⁷ If she is drawn both to the sex appeal and the motherly aspects of breasts as I suggested above, then it would not be wrong to apply Nicoletta's commentary on this costume.

What is more revealing about Bourgeois' own confrontation through this sculpture can be found in the first paragraphs of the same article: "Through the duplicity of *Femme-Maisons*, the artist explores problems of gender differentiation, particularly when a woman is forced to find her own identity in terms of a man."⁵⁸ By admitting the fact that she puts her breasted-cloak on because men like them, and that she likes to show them off, Bourgeois exemplifies how as a woman she becomes proud of a part of her body that is important for the other sex. Even though she does not openly tell that she likes multiple breasts because of their motherly connotations as well, we are to find clues about it from her earlier works.

Interestingly enough, Bourgeois' own explanations about *Femme-Maison* series shed light on her costume wearing performance.

[Femme Maison] does not know that she is half naked, and she does not know that she is trying to hide. That is to say, she is totally self-defeating because she shows herself at the very moment that she thinks she is hiding.⁵⁹

Similarly, by putting on her "cloak," Bourgeois may in fact be revealing her innermost desires and dilemmas about femininity: the relationship between sexiness and motherly

⁵⁷ Wye, 1994, p.200.

⁵⁸ Nicoletta, 1992, p.1

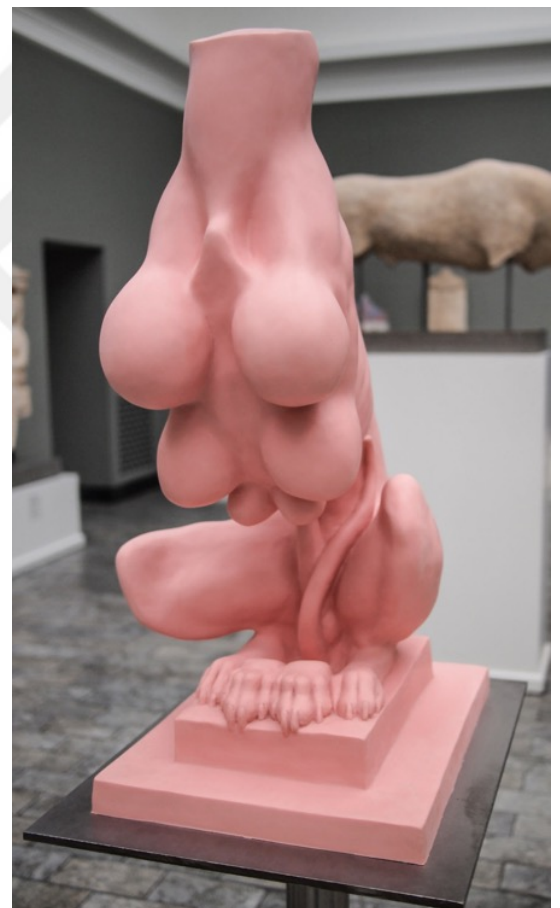
⁵⁹ "Louise Bourgeois Retrospective: Room 1."

caring symbolized by breasts/udders, and the tension between wanting to be desired and having a liberated identity.

In addition to pointing out to the ambivalence of her female identity, the *Avenza* costume also suggests more ideas about the development of the notion of gender in Bourgeois.

4.1. *Nature Study*

In a sculpture series created more than a decade later, titled *Nature Study*, Bourgeois uses several round, breast-like shapes on the body of a wild animal. Reminiscent of headless marble sculptures of antiquity displaying the splendor of youth, *Nature Study* features the nude body of a half animal-half human figure. Posing with his four savage paws, sharp nails, and a tail gathered in front of its body, the figure seems to have a very realistic pair of human legs. **(Img 9)** Its torso is made of six breasts, lining up in twos from the neck to the hips. What makes this unusual figure a male is not the possession of a penis, for he does not have an explicitly present penis, but his very large Adam's apple. (Adam's apple is one of the two things that differentiate the female body from the male body.) In her similar sculptures of half human-half animal bodies, Bourgeois leaves a significantly large hollow in the neck to suggest the femaleness of the figure.) In the documentary *Louise*



Img 9: *Nature Study*, 1986

Bourgeois: Un Film, Bourgeois explains this work by relating it to her father:

Since my father destroyed me, I destroyed other, why not? I take an animal that is really a masculine animal. Yes, really a masculine animal. Then I give him

breasts. Then after the first pair, I give him the second pair, why not? Then I cut his head off. It's a means of teasing. You teased me, I'll tease you. [sic]⁶⁰

As seen in the stories of tangerine, Bourgeois' father would ridicule her for not having a penis and for disappointingly being a mere female. Bourgeois admits that her father's teasing damaged her self-esteem significantly. She explains this sculpture by retaliation: from a female figure with a penis made of tangerine peel to a headless breasted-male-wolf creature. Breasts negate masculinity, and they become a form of ridicule, a sign of powerlessness when placed on a male. Men like breasts only when they are on women. While a woman holding an erect penis seem threatening and savage, a male figure with breasts seems ridiculous. Even though Bourgeois takes pride in her possession of breasts through a costume, when she places them on the body of a male animal, she takes her revenge.

4.2. *Destruction of the Father*

Her desire to destroy and take revenge on her father culminates in an earlier iconic work that is much more direct than the *Nature Study*. A year after Bourgeois' father dies in 1950, Bourgeois begins psychoanalysis, an adventure that would last almost thirty years.⁶¹ Quarter of a century later, she creates a dramatic, room-size installation in which she tries to exorcize the haunting quarrels with her father.

Destruction of the Father is the "first self-enclosed environment or installation" created by Bourgeois.⁶² It was first shown in 112 Greene St. Gallery in 1974, and had the French title *Le Repas du Soir* (the Dinner of the Night). The work was set in a box-like room that resembled a dinner table and a bedroom that was surrounded by bulbous forms attached to the ceiling and appearing from the floor. These large round forms were made

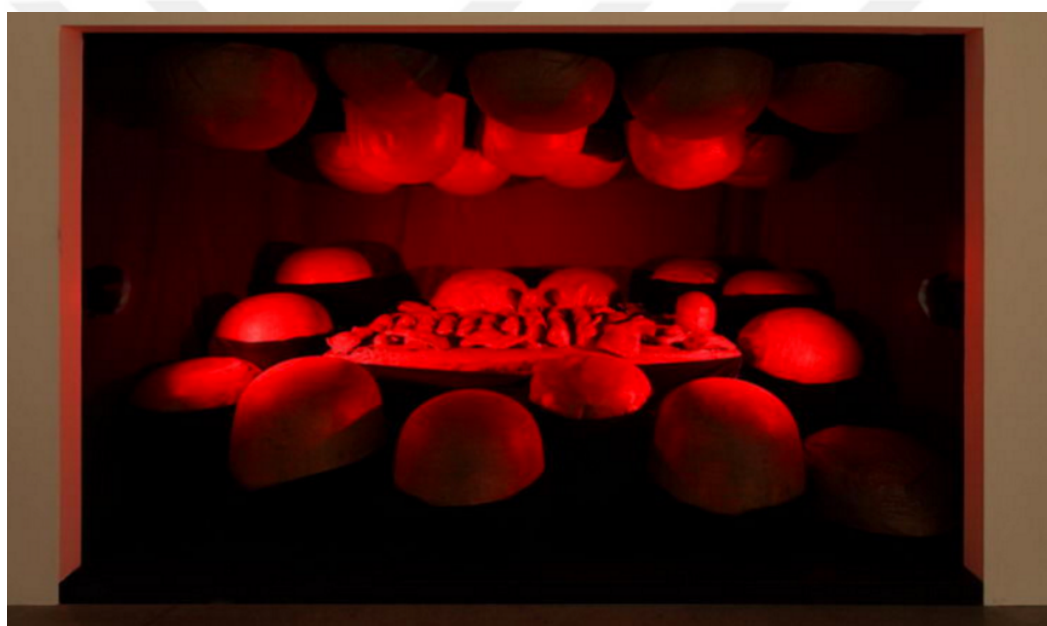
⁶⁰ Guichard, 1993, 10.15 minute.

⁶¹ Larratt-Smith, Philip. "Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed ." Proa Museum , proa.org/eng/exhibition-louise-bourgeois-obras-12.php. Accessed 4 Nov.2016

⁶² "Louise Bourgeois Retrospective: Room 6." Tate.org, www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/exhibition/louise-bourgeois/room-guide/louise-bourgeois-room-6

of plaster and latex and appeared soft. In the middle of the room was a table on top of which a plethora of breast-like forms, as seen in *Avenza*, formed the silhouette of a dismembered body. The three parts of the room were bound by black curtains on which a powerful red light was reflected. When seen from across, the red light makes it seem like the table is left from a war scene, and the battleground is bathed in blood. When talking about this work, Bourgeois recalls the dinner tables where she and her siblings would have to bear their oppressive father. **(Img 10)**

It is basically a table, the awful, terrifying family dinner table headed by the father who sits and gloats... My father would get nervous looking at us, and he would explain to all of us what a great man he was. So, in exasperation, we grabbed the man, threw him on the table, dismembered him, and proceeded to devour him.⁶³



Img 10: *Destruction of the Father*, 1974,
Proa Museum installation view 2011

Clearly a fantasy of the artist, the work supposes that the oppressed children and wife were able to destroy and digest the ruthless head of the table/family. When we think back to the story of the tangerines, and how her father would metaphorically peel Bourgeois' skin alive in front of guests and then eat the tangerine, the work becomes part of a continuum. As pointed out by Nixon, the installation is formed "not as an object but a three-dimensional scene," and the audience becomes an invitee to witness the scene of murder or the

⁶³ quoted in Nixon, Mignon. "Eating Words." *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1999, p. 66. www.jstor.org/stable/1360635. Accessed 11 January 2016. (in Jean Fremon, preface, *Louise Bourgeois: Retrospective 1947-1984* (Galerie Maeght Lelong: Paris, 1984), unpaginated.)

overtaking of the patriarchal tyrant.⁶⁴ **(Img 12)** Poor *Louison* makes a comeback and defeats her father in the same battlefield - the dinner table.

The way Bourgeois describes how she constructed the piece is almost as dramatic as the work itself. She explains how she used actual animal parts:



Img 11: *Destruction of the Father*, detail.
Installation view from 1974

All those things of latex are actually casts of animal limbs. I went down to Washington Meat..and got lamb shoulders, chicken legs and cast them all in soft plaster. I pushed them down to it, then turned the mold over, opened it, threw away the meat and cast the forms in latex. I built it here in my house. It was a very murderous piece.⁶⁵

She admits to the violence of the scene. Her account makes one think that the destruction was carried out during the creation of the piece and the installation is only a monument to that destruction, a crime scene where the audience is not allowed to step in.

Another aspect about this scene is how close it brings the act of eating and the bed, where one sleeps or makes love. “The sculpture represents both a table and a bed...Those two things count in one’s erotic life: dinner table and bed,” recounts Bourgeois.⁶⁶ Both eating and having sexual intercourse are related with pleasure and desire. The

body parts involved in two activities correspond and it is not coincidental that the human psyche links the two. **(Img 11)**

What is different in Bourgeois’ installation is that the work is no longer a free-standing statue. It creates a capturing environment that is presented almost like a painting, since audience is not allowed to enter the room. The vertical phallic structure seen in most sculptures is also lost in this installation, leaving its space to a horizontal ground on which the body of the father lies. The father loses his power and cannot stand any longer. His body is covered in warts and round bulging breasts. Even larger protuberances surround

⁶⁴ Nixon, Mignon. “Eating Words.” *Oxford Art Journal*, vol. 22, no. 2, 1999, p. 66. www.jstor.org/stable/1360635. Accessed 11 January 2016.

⁶⁵ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p.115-116.

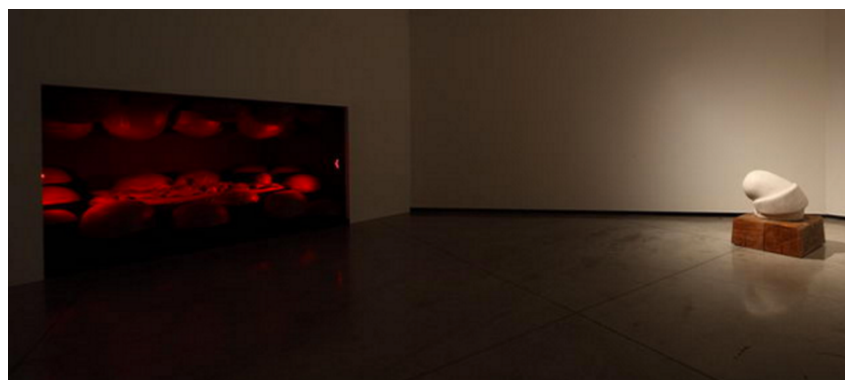
⁶⁶ *ibid.*

the bed on which he is left. If this is indeed a bed, his privacy is violated by the overbearing round figures who might have even raped him. If this is a table, his body seems to be devoured by creatures that captured him. Anything phallic about the father is rounded into a breast form and exists no longer exists. This, in fact, is the actual destruction of the father: transforming the phallic forms of the piece into round shapes. The emasculation continues in *Nature Study*, where Bourgeois keeps on destroying the father figure, not by castration but by emasculating with the addition of breasts. One could say that she first destroys the phallic forms, and changes them into round forms to create something new from them.

To see Bourgeois' work merely as destruction would be misleading. Although she clearly destroys the image of her father her psyche, one might say that the act of destruction brings with itself a new formation: a wild male animal with breasts or carcass of a father with breasts and hips. In her article, Nixon looks at this notion from the point of view of Melanie Klein:

The interplay between destruction and reparation is structural to the Kleinian model of creativity, and Bourgeois's statements about her process of working often have a Kleinian ring: 'You hack away, which is aggressive, and then you polish what you have made, oil it and take care of it for thirty years. That is a nurturing.'⁶⁷

The dichotomy of destruction and repair, hacking away and polishing, can especially be seen in *Nature Study*, the marble sculpture with many breasts. When carving the figure out of the sturdy marble, Bourgeois chops away the head. She first chisels and then polishes the rest of the body and the round breasts. The breasts that require more of the polishing are actually what “destroys” the masculinity of the father. In a way, Bourgeois' works are born out of this dynamic of violence and caring.



Img 12: Theater scene-like installation of
Destruction of the Father, 1974,
Proa Musuem installation view 2011

⁶⁷ Nixon, 1999, p.70

4.3. *Janus Fleuri*

At this point, it is apt to examine another series by the artist, which speaks to this theme of dichotomy, namely the *Janus Fleuri* (Blossoming Janus). This series from 1968 consists of six marble sculptures in which the artist brings together what seem like male and female organs of reproduction.⁶⁸ Taking inspiration from the double-headed Roman God “Janus,” Bourgeois combines both female and male without destroying either one. The Roman deity that looks both backwards toward the past and forward toward the future, the god of new beginnings, “blossom” in Bourgeois’ hands. The choice of “blossoming” (or *fleurir* in French that translates literally to “flowering”) in the title refers to maturation, at the end of which you are awarded with flowers. After considering what Bourgeois and the scholars recount about this piece, revisiting the title “blossoming” further shows Bourgeois’ take on the notion of gender. **(Img 13)**



Img 13: *Janus Fleuri*, 1968

Despite having the same base, the works in this series slightly differ from each other. **(Img 14)** Resembling the half-oval shape of a butter croissant, the bronze extends

⁶⁸ “Janus Fleuri - Louise Bourgeois.” *ICA Boston*, Institute of Contemporary Art Boston, Dec. 2014, www.icaboston.org/art/louise-bourgeois/janus-fleuri. Accessed 25 October 2016.

from both sides and is hung from its uppermost middle point. The middle of the front surface has a texture and form that connotes the lips of a vulva. On both sides of the symmetry line, which divides the sculpture into two, there are ambiguous and crude images of a male body and a female body. When seen from afar, before grasping the details of its surface, the work resembles two flaccid penises with a vulva in the middle.



Img 14: Louise Bourgeois, installation view from Dia:Beacon featuring *Janus Fleuri* series

4.3.1. Is *Janus* a Cyborg?

“Sometimes I am totally concerned with female shapes – clusters of breasts like clouds but I often merge the imagery – phallic breasts, male and female, active and passive,”⁶⁹ says the artist. It stands particularly valid for this sculpture. However, contrary to *Nature Study* or the *Destruction of the Father*, we see a harmonious unity of the two or a homogenous ambiguity in this work. Neither female, nor male imagery overpowers the other. Created almost fifteen years before Haraway’s “*A Cyborg Manifesto*” was published, the work almost foreshadows the idea of a cyborg. Even though Bourgeois does not argue about the

⁶⁹ McEvelley, Thomas. *Sculpture in the Age of Doubt*. New York, School of Visual Arts, 1999.p.242

integration of men, animal and machine, or openly argue for a cyborg-like identity, her imagery raises a resistance to patriarchal notions of gender and invented dualities. Decades later when we look at her work, we can see traces of a “utopian tradition of imagining a world without gender, which is perhaps a world without genesis, but maybe also a world without end.”⁷⁰

It can be argued that Bourgeois was trying to picture a world of no-gender, but it is clear that she was creating a different notion of gender by uniting the male and the female. We can say that she was aiming to write a different version of her own genesis and deal with the dichotomy she was experiencing as a female artist. Despite undergoing psychoanalysis for almost thirty years, Bourgeois admitted that the two major figures of psychoanalysis did not help her: “Freud and Lacan did nothing for the artist. They were barking up the wrong tree. They don’t help any. I simply can’t use them.”⁷¹ Although Bourgeois was heavily influenced by Lacan and Freud, as an artist she still felt the need to create her own reality to deal with her world. The widespread theories of femininity and gender available at the time were not helping her enough.

We can argue that just like Haraway, Bourgeois was also resisting against the myth of Oedipus and was creating her own cyborgs. “The cyborg is a matter of fiction and lived experience that changes what counts as women’s experience in the late twentieth century.”⁷² In the light of how Haraway’s definition of a cyborg shows that Bourgeois’ sculptures are a mix of fiction and experience. She was indeed taking inspiration from her own life in most of her works and declared that *Janus Fleuri* was “perhaps a self-portrait – one of many.”⁷³ Her self-portrait “transgressed boundaries,” made a “potent fusion” and was impregnated with “dangerous possibilities.”⁷⁴ An image mixing both female and male genitals that features the abstract bodies of both sexes was provocative and powerful. The reason why it did not get rejected by the art world could have been the age of its creator, who, nearing her seventies could have not been seen as particularly sexual or dangerous.

Art historian Wagner explained the effects of the fusion that Bourgeois creates:

Knowledge of [this work] feels partial - in fact I find myself feeling rather anxiously for parts of my own body in their presence, looking for my breasts the way I might look for my keys - yet these sensations register less as empathy than as something

⁷⁰ Haraway, Donna J. “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.” *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: the Reinvention of Nature*, Routledge, New York, 1991.p.150

⁷¹ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p. 229

⁷² Haraway, 1991, p.149

⁷³ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p. 90-1. (First published in *Art Now*, vol. 1, no:7, September 1969).

⁷⁴ Haraway, 1991, p.154

more like misrecognition or exclusion. This last sensation occurs, I think, because the sculpture redoubles itself to become simultaneously monstrous, and a formal finished whole.⁷⁵

The sculpture unites what seems like different parts of the body which the artist describes as “perhaps a double facial mask, two breasts, two knees.”⁷⁶ The way it unites incongruous parts throws the viewers aback, and one cannot be sure whether this sculpture is a finished creature or it is still in formation. The scary monster that it represents is not too far away from the spirit of a cyborg which seeks to mobilize consciousness.

In *Janus Fleuri*, Bourgeois attempts to eliminate the “troubling dualisms” such as “male/female, whole/part, active/passive,” as cited in Haraway.⁷⁷ Although the artist denies the motivation of a political agenda in her works, the imagery she creates speaks to the political, and also inspires political struggles. Male and female, perhaps as different as Janus’s two heads symbolizing the past and the future, mirror each other in Bourgeois’ *Janus*. A blossoming god of creation, it suggests the idea of a regeneration of the notions of gender. It encourages a rethinking of how identities struggle in regimes founded on duality, and represents the potential of the unity of genders when they become a whole without either one being denied. The political aspect of Bourgeois’ works can be seen further in her photo-text published in *Artforum*.

⁷⁵ Wagner, 1999, p.22

⁷⁶ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p. 90-1.

⁷⁷ Haraway, 1991, p.177

5. *CHILD ABUSE: A SIMPLE CONFESSION OR THE PORTRAIT OF A NATION?*

On November 6, 1982, Louise Bourgeois' first retrospective opened at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The show was on view for four months, through February 8, 1983 and featured over a hundred of Bourgeois' works dating from 1940 to 1980s. Two of her room-sized installations, *Destruction of the Father* and *Confrontation*, were reconstructed for the retrospective. During the show, the museum organized two lecture programs focusing on Bourgeois' art, one by Lucy Lippard, the acclaimed art critic, the other by Robert Pincus-Witten, a professor of art history. The show was supposed to travel both nationally and internationally after it was closed in New York.⁷⁸ Bourgeois was the rising star in the beginning of 1980s. She was one of the most talked artists. The curator of her retrospective, Wye, had written in the press release that the museum was proud to feature the artist:

Who has always worked in a very personal, idiosyncratic, and expressionistic mode....foreshadowed recent developments in the contemporary visual arts and the prevalent artistic atmosphere, where individuality and intensity are widely appreciated.⁷⁹

Interestingly enough, one of the reasons why Bourgeois had stayed at the margins of the art scene up until 1970s, was her mode of working. Aside from being a French woman, the fact that she was dealing precisely with personal topics did not interest the art world much until then.⁸⁰ Despite this, Wye claimed that Bourgeois was foreshadowing a recent demand for individuality and expressionism in art: "A fundamental change in aesthetic thinking has occurred. Personal content and deeply felt themes are sought and

⁷⁸ "First Retrospective Exhibition Of Bourgeois Work To Open At The Museum Of Modern Art." Moma.org, 2010, www.moma.org/momaorg/shared/pdfs/docs/press_archives/5978/releases/MOMA_1982_0034_34.pdf?2010.p.1

⁷⁹ MoMA press release, p.1-2.

⁸⁰ MoMA's history of exhibitions between 1950-1970s show that majority of the exhibitions were dedicated to Post-war American artists such as: De Kooning, Motherwell, Andre, Rothko, among others. European artists exhibited were solely male, renown surrealists or cubists such as: Matisse, Picasso, Chirico, Tanguy, Miro and Rodin, among others. Compared to these renown names, Bourgeois was a planet that was not even in the orbit of the art constellation at the time.

explored”.⁸¹ Without giving sustainable evidence as to why this change in artistic perception had occurred after a couple of decades, Wye persuaded the audience that the expansive retrospective was a witness to Bourgeois’ lifelong progress.

As if to corroborate with and strengthen Wye’s claims as to why Bourgeois’ work was important and unique, the artist herself published a photo-text in *Artforum*’s December 1982 issue. In addition to the cover of the magazine featuring *Eye to Eye* (1968–70), a marble sculpture by Bourgeois, *Artforum* published a full eight-page coverage of the artist’s project titled “*Child Abuse: A Project by Louise Bourgeois*”. In Bernadac & Obrist’s anthology, which documents the article, it notes that the project was made at the invitation of the editor, Ingrid Sischy.⁸² **Appendix 1**

At first read, the article resembles a very bizarre and perplexing piece of confession, one that is so intimate that it renders itself as farce. It fills up the reader with questions. Is it indeed a sincere piece of writing? Did Bourgeois write it as a 71-year old woman, or are these cut from the pages of her adolescent journal? Is she trying to get back at her parents or Sadie, her father’s mistress, who are all gone by then? Is she giving this naïve explanation to justify her art making? To whom is it confession addressed? What are we supposed to take from it? How is this writing serving her on-going retrospective?

At a second read, this piece with its charged title and curious imagery can be described mildly as “sensational.” It shows an old artist who had the misfortune of having a terrible childhood that even now, in her seventies, she still cannot save herself from her haunting past. Yet she is also an artist who is using art and sculpture-making as an ingenious tool to help deal with her trauma.

Indeed such a sensation could generate a fair amount of interest in an artist whose career had just begun to pick up in an era where the sterile nature of Formalist Abstraction had run its course. As mentioned by her long-time assistant Jerry Gorovy, the younger generation “was interested in narrative, in issues of gender and sexuality, interested in mining a whole another kind of imagery [than the Greenberg formalism]”.⁸³ The society was ready for Bourgeois’ art entwined with personal narratives. However, even in such an atmosphere the reason why she tried to explain her art with such simple and raw language, and limit all her inspiration to her early life remains a mystery.

⁸¹ *ibid.*

⁸² Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p.133

⁸³ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008, 31.00-33.00 minute.

With all these questions in my mind, I first analyze the physical aspects of the article: its content and arrangement of images and texts. Afterwards, I explicate the complexity behind the terms that are implied in the writing and show how they bring together some of the seminal points in Bourgeois' practice.

5.1. What Bourgeois expresses in *Child Abuse: Endless Frustration of a Victimized Daughter*

The eight-page story by Bourgeois consists of a fairly short text: a mere twenty-six sentences, three of which are questions. Each page features a full-size photograph as its background. A total of three pages present photographs from Bourgeois' childhood: one appears to be with her mother, one appears to be with her father and the last one, as explained by the artist, is with Sadie (her English tutor who also happens to be her father's mistress). Four pages present photos of her sculptures. Finally, the remaining page includes a bizarre shot of her childhood home, gated by a metal door with two stone sculptures on each side. On the last page of the article, next to the sculpture of a penis hung from the ceiling, careful eyes can read the 8-font sentence: "*The current retrospective of Louise Bourgeois will remain at the Museum of Modern Art in New York until February 8, 1983.*"

This subtly placed sentence gives the whole article an air of what is called today "a sponsored content." The term implies a refined version of a full-page ad that is often able to disguise itself as a proper article. It is as if the article promotes the exhibition in an unconventional way but with a very conventional message hidden underneath: *If you are intrigued by this bizarre piece of article and these curious images, come and find out at MoMA today!*

We may entertain the idea that this was a clever way Bourgeois chose to respond to the blatantly promotional offer that the magazine had during her show. If that was the case, she seems to have given the editors exactly what they wanted, which she could not have openly said in any other way. She gave them a piece of sensation disguised as "truth," the truth she had not yet had the opportunity to reveal.

Another way of looking at this article is to accept it as the truth of the artist, and consider it as Bourgeois' clever way of using media to her advantage. As revealed by

curator Robert Storr's documentary "The Spider, the Mistress..." this was the first-time Bourgeois revealed the story of the mistress in her family. Later on during the exhibition, Bourgeois did a slideshow in MoMA in 1983 called *Partial Recall* and explained her family history by using similar photos from her childhood.⁸⁴ It was a time for Bourgeois to elaborate on her personal narrative in an era where the definition of art was beginning to change. What is most striking in the piece is the feeling of "betrayal" and frustration, which Bourgeois felt for being used as a "pawn." She names the article "Child Abuse," a title that describes her feelings.

There are several writers who comment on this piece as a genuine expression of Bourgeois' feelings. For example, Marie-Laure Bernadac one of the editors of the compilation *Destruction of the Father, Reconstruction of The Father*, explains how writing and drawing are forms of keeping a journal for Bourgeois. She explains that writing becomes an origin for Bourgeois' works, and with both methods she records and deals with her emotions. Bernadac proposes that a third form of diary for Bourgeois is "the spoken word."⁸⁵ She goes on to say that Bourgeois "wants to reveal all to be 'a woman without secrets', capable of carrying introspection ever deeper in order to confront and conquer her own anxiety."⁸⁶ The editor claims that the reason why Bourgeois shares so much with her audience is because she refuses to be like her mother or father, and does not want to keep any secrets. By relieving herself of the burden of secrets, she also wants to maintain a transparency for the sake of her own wellbeing. When we think of all that we do not know about the artist's life and the constant repetition of the same stories she shares throughout her life, it is hard to believe in this simple motivation.

The article may indeed be read as "a third form as diary" as Bernadac puts forth. Writing as if she is speaking directly to the audience in a form of monologue, Bourgeois could be recording her current emotions and dealing with them through a method of confession. Her writing shows that Bourgeois is not only angry with her father for cheating on her mother, but she is also furious with her mother for allowing it. Her tutor also betrays the young Louise by hiding her real identity and pretending to be an innocent teacher. It is as if the whole conspiracy is plotted against the little girl and the little girl only.

⁸⁴ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008, 54.00 minute.

⁸⁵ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p.18

⁸⁶ *ibid.*

The immense frustration and feeling of betrayal persist in Bourgeois' life in the following decades. In an interview in March 1989, Bourgeois comments on her piece titled "*Blind Leading the Blind*," an abstract sculpture consisting of ten vertical table-leg-like sculptures in a position where they seem to be following a procession: "These are handicapped persons because they're supposed to protect and they're blind. They are good-for-nothings because they're feminine".⁸⁷

In her article, the artist and filmmaker Trisha McCrae underlines Bourgeois' feelings about her mother by commenting on this sculpture that was first made in wood in 1947 and then cast in bronze in 1989. McCrae writes that the fact that her mother turned a blind eye to her husband's affair left Bourgeois with a deep sense of abandonment.⁸⁸ She was left vulnerable to her father's affair and her tutor's guise because her mother was not able to put an end to this situation. Yet what is interesting is Bourgeois' attack on "femininity." She says the figures are useless "because they are feminine". There appears to be a deep feeling of powerlessness and helplessness, vulnerability and fragility for being a woman in a patriarchal world. Since she attacks women in an unjustifiable way, it can be inferred that Bourgeois may be frustrated with herself as well. She maybe dealing with the fact that, as a female artist in a male dominated art scene, her power is limited just like her mother's must have been some 50 years ago.

A print from 1945 shows the artist's vulnerability after her mother's death. *Vase of Tears*, a black and white print of a vase form, reveals Bourgeois' emotional state in relation to her father. In the catalogue *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois*, Wye comments on this piece as a self-portrait from a time when Bourgeois possessed both healthy and neurotic fears.⁸⁹ She explains how her father used to make fun of her pain and say "Do not wallow in your tears; do not pretend."⁹⁰ Bourgeois recalls:

It was so cruel. He made fun of me. He used my tears to bring me to my knees. He made me into a ridiculous clown. He made me feel that my tears were false tears...Sarcasm can be a form of child abuse.⁹¹

In this account, we see a daughter who is not strong or old enough to protect herself against her father's tyranny. We also see a woman who is left powerless and helpless because of

⁸⁷ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p.180. (Interview with Alain Kirili first published in 1989)

⁸⁸ Mc Crae, Trisha. "Louise Bourgeois. Maman: From the Outside In." Art&Education, N/A www.artandeducation.net/paper/louise-bourgeois-maman-from-the-outside-in/. Accessed 4 March 2016.

⁸⁹ Wye, 1994, p.66.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

⁹¹ *ibid.*

an insensitive father who refuses to see and empathize with her daughter's mourning. She again uses the phrase "child abuse" to talk about her father.

Another print from 1947 shows Bourgeois' depiction of the river of Bièvre, where she attempted to commit suicide after her mother's death. The catalogue entry reads:

Bourgeois recalls that when her mother died, she was twenty years old and 'was absolutely lost'. She took comfort in visiting her mother's grave, but her father mocked her grief. 'When my father insulted me, I threw myself into the river.'⁹²

Both prints from 1940s, witness the artist's fragility and powerlessness when faced with the attacks of her father. When criticizing the female figures in *Blind Leading the Blind*, the artist may well be expressing the frustration with her femininity as well.

It is possible to see the effects of her frustration and the feeling of being a victim in *Child Abuse*. We see these feelings throughout Bourgeois' earlier prints and in her interviews from the 1980s. The state of her feelings and her accounts do not seem to evolve much even after decades. Yet if we were to avoid having to psychoanalyze the artist, as many art historians have done in the past, we would have to read Bourgeois' comments on *Blind Leading the Blind* and the *Child Abuse* article from a third and a much broader perspective.

5.2. What Bourgeois implies in *Child Abuse*: Social Roles and Identities

If we do not limit ourselves to the artist's literal account in *Child Abuse* but take her words one step further, it is possible to read the article as a form of social critique. In fact, in one of her interviews from a later year, the artist herself warns the interviewer to ignore the literal meaning. She says, "I never talk literally. Never, never, never. You do not get anywhere by being literal except to be puny. You have to use analogy and interpretation and leaps of all kinds."⁹³ Even though she says these words six years after than the publication of this piece, I believe that Bourgeois never intended her words to be taken literally. In fact, all her simple explanations may be her way of testing the audience and provoke them to think further.

⁹² Wye, 1994, p.65

⁹³ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p.155 (Interview with Stuart Morgan, published in 1988)

In a similar vein, Bourgeois' attack on "useless" women may be directed towards the women of her time, and refer to their lack of power and acceptance of male dominance. Her attack on her parents and Sadie may indeed be an attack on countless other parents who inevitably find themselves in similar situations. Her reaction to what may be referred to as an ordinary scandal may be a critique of society and the status quo in general.

In order to better understand the status quo in Bourgeois' time, let us focus on the four identities highlighted in *Child Abuse*. These identities keep coming back in Bourgeois' stories and works: the Father, the Mother, the Mistress, and the Daughter. The characters of *Child Abuse* serve to reflect both the defined social roles in society and the relationships in the artist's life. With its clever and dramatic use of images and raw language, the project makes readers question the idea of a normative family: What are the expected roles of the members in a family? What are the power dynamics between these members? How does each member become affected in their reciprocal roles?

In relation to these questions, the reader's interest is piqued about the relationships in Bourgeois' own family. How did the relationships in Bourgeois' childhood affect her own family? What kind of a mother and wife was Bourgeois herself? While the confession written in *Artforum* answers some of these questions, it also draws the invisible portrait of a normative family and serves as a justification for Bourgeois' own adult life.

The following is a simple summary of the roles of each character in *Child Abuse*.

Father: has power and authority. He serves the social institution of patriarchy in a way. He is to maintain his position of power in the family even if he has to pay for it with his emotional sanity by fighting in wars. (Men have obligatory military duty).

Mother: her primary duty is to raise children. She serves her husband and her children. In certain cases, she works for the family business as well, and serves outside of the house. After becoming a mother, she eventually becomes unavailable and unappealing to the sexual adventures of the father. If she wants to maintain her family and her economic stability, she needs to accept her husband's affairs.

Mistress: like the Mother, she serves more than one entity. As the mistress she serves the father; as the tutor, she serves the child. Living with the family, she is constantly reminded of her despicable position as the adulteress, an inferior woman. Bourgeois defines the

position of the mistress as “standard piece of furniture in a middle-class family,”⁹⁴ referring to the irrelevance of the subject position of the mistress. She is *Fallen Woman* (1981) as implied by Bourgeois’ sculpture in the photo text.

Daughter: she has to please the Father and the Mother. She does not have autonomy. She is expected to continue the norms of womanhood, which she learns from her mother.

I suppose that in the last four pages of the project, each photograph symbolizes one of these personalities. The suspended penis on the last page, a version of Bourgeois’ famous *La Filette* sculpture, refers to the Father, who is the representative of patriarchy in the family. Hung from the ceiling, it presides over the room with its massive presence, yet it also seems to be sentenced to manhood as a form of punishment. The hanging and the perpetual erection shows how much the position of power and authority costs men, who do not have the ability to be flexible as their role and position in society are pre-determined.

In a selection of her statements, Bourgeois makes a great remark about the sexual dynamics of her father and her mother, which reveals her deep criticism against the institution of marriage: “In France, the woman is always a mother. Most men remain children and marry mother figures. For eroticism, they have mistresses. Physically, my father was too afraid to make love to my mother.”⁹⁵ She observes a phenomenon that arguably still continues even today: the impossibility of co-existence of sexuality and gentle caring, the tension between love and lust. The feedback loop this phenomenon necessitates and the *raison d’être* of mistresses.

What place does this situation leave for women in society? They either become *la femme* (the woman/the wife) or the mistress. They are either the functional, yet undesirable wife or the immoral yet desirable mistress. On the previous page of the story, (p.46), we see a sculpture that appears to be a study for *Blind Leading the Blind*. It is a type of table that stands on four, thin, precarious legs that appear to be almost walking. The table-top like surface of the sculpture connotes to the responsibilities and functionality of a mother in a family. The table serves a purpose and is an indispensable object in any house. Yet it has very unsteady legs. In a way, this draft of a sculpture embodies the pivotal, yet unsecured position of women in the family and society. She can easily be shaken by outside factors and the interior of the house seems to be the safest possible place for her. The

⁹⁴ Bourgeois, 1982.

⁹⁵ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p.226.

sculpture stands as a form of built structure, a simple form of a house, and brings into mind the *Femme-maison* prints of Bourgeois which present female-bodied houses, or haunted female bodies. The domesticity and the object position of the mother/the wife are shown through the photograph.

On the previous page on the right, the small marble sculpture symbolizes the mistress. Aptly titled *Fallen Woman* (1981), this marble represents the irresolvable situation of the status of the mistress. A pure and innocent-looking face is carved out of a pristine and glossy marble. The unmoving doll-like face highlights the beauty and passivity of the woman, the mistress. Unlike her detailed face, her body is abstracted; she has no limbs and has no capacity to move. The tail-like extension connected to her face seems to be designed in order to be held and moved to the desires of the Father. The only thing the mistress has the capacity for is to put down her head and wait to be moved, which is very much like the mistresses in society who were subjected to rules of men and their families.

Next to the Mistress is the most interesting and curious photograph of all. Two stone-carved solid sculptures stand by each side of a metal gate as if they are the two pillars of Family. They do not have limbs, only heads and bodies, but the metal gate connecting from where their arms are supposed to be can be interpreted as their arms, protecting the house at the back, inside of which lives the child. The image symbolizes both the institution of family and the child. All of the rigid squares, rectangles, and perpendicular lines present in the image connote inflexibility, a type of moulding of the child. She is under the protection of the parents who form a metal gate with their existence and at the same time she is held hostage by their rules and manners. Compared to other more neutral-looking photographs in the project, this morbid and structured image almost embodies the title itself. Can Bourgeois be saying that all families commit a sort of child abuse under the guise of protection? I believe Bourgeois questions the institution of family in the entire article and particularly in this image. She encourages the reader to think about the pillars that hold a family together and the roles each pillar has.

Another reason to push ourselves to think beyond the literal accounts of the artist in this article is her attitude towards the cheating of her father. In the first chapter of the documentary “The Spider, the Mistress...,” we see Bourgeois speaking of her childhood. In the company of photographs from the war, we hear Bourgeois talk about how common it was for men returning from war to seek sexual adventures in order to deal with the trauma

of times spent in trenches.⁹⁶ Bourgeois reveals that a cheating father was not uncommon in France at the time. Accordingly, it would not be naïve to assume that “accepting mothers” were also common. Maybe the story of a sit-in nanny/mistress in Bourgeois’ case was rare, but it is revealed that adultery was a common phenomenon in families at the time.

The article seems to assert that all these defined social identities are the causes of “child abuse” in society. The family structures and the existing roles, are the reason why similar stories perpetuate and the mistress becomes a “standard piece of furniture in a middle-class family.” Families everywhere continue to jeopardize the psychological health of their children with these triangular relationships and with the illusion of love and lust between the parents.

Dealing with the same subject, one of Bourgeois’ prints from 1974 expresses the position of the child in such a triangular dynamic as pictured in *Child Abuse*. The print consists of a simple triangle image drawn on a white surface and is titled “*Father, Protect yourself...*”.⁹⁷ Bourgeois recounts that taken from a well-known medieval history, this phrase symbolizes the way the son protected his father who was the king. Bourgeois, on the other hand, decides to twist this phrase and turn it into “*Child, protect yourself: beware of the triangle.*”⁹⁸ She explains:

The father is at the top of the triangle, playing one against the other...it is a power play...everyone in the triangle practices ferocity...I have an obsession with the triangle, it is an emotional problem. Everyone wants exclusive love and devotion...but that does not exist.⁹⁹

Growing up in the presence of a relationship between the father, the mother and the mistress, the child looks for ways of existence. In this case, Bourgeois tries to exist by keeping herself away from the cruelty of the triangle. She is aware of the fact that it is the father who causes enmity between women and he is the reason for their abuse. Inside the triangle is filled with rancor and it is sharp on the corners. She goes on to say that the triangle left her with a permanent mark, an emotional damage. As a result of her experience, Bourgeois does not have faith in a normative definition of fidelity and love.

In fact, this photo-text can be read as a feminist statement questioning the socially sanctioned forms of family, desire and love. Bourgeois objects against the tyranny of the

⁹⁶ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008, 25.00-27.00 minute.

⁹⁷ Wye, 1994, p.142

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *ibid.*

trio existing side-by-side with the illusion and ideal of fidelity. Even though her statements such as these are regarded as personal anecdotes, they comment significantly on sociopolitical topics and resonate with the writings of many theorists such as Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Donna Haraway.

If we look into Michel Foucault's theories on biopolitics (1970s) written at the same decade as this article, we can find connections between some of the examined ideas. Both these thinkers mention the defined social roles of characters and how these pre-formulated identities are unnatural and confine the individuals. While Foucault underlines the role of biopolitics in controlling the society by defining people's roles, Haraway proposes a total blending and blurring of these roles and sexes as explained in the context of *Janus Fleuri*. Foucault claims that all desires are produced by laws and thereby they are shaped by laws and norms. Haraway shows how our desires and dreams are limited by existing binaries and without dissolving them we cannot liberate our desires. In addition to proposing a new way of looking at the world and humankind's place in it, Haraway in her *Cyborg Manifesto* also calls for a liberation of desires. By breaking free of the maze of dualisms, humans can also begin to redefine desire and pleasure. In a world where these terms can be redefined and liberated from crippling confinements, maybe there would not be any mistresses nor any man who sought sexual extra-marital adventures because he could not develop a sexual relationship with his wife. In such a world, maybe there would be no marriages at all and children would not have to be burdened by their parents' choices. Although Bourgeois' writings are not explicitly activist in nature and they are not a call for revolution, they make a very subtle critique of the society she lived in and they foreshadow the ideas expressed by Haraway.

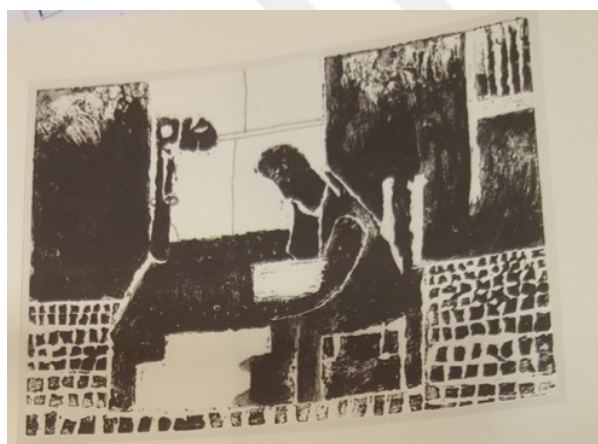
We have enough reasons to believe that the *Child Abuse* project was neither a mere justification nor an explanation of Bourgeois' art making in the changing art environment. It was not simply written to assert Bourgeois' victimized position in the family either. Its primary (or most obvious) purpose was not making a critique of the society either. Then what was the real motive behind its publishing?

Bourgeois was 71 at this stage and her career was ascending. From a more cynical perspective, we can think that she was using her family history as a way of justifying her private life, as a way of explaining her motherhood and womanhood. Even though Bourgeois spent nearly all her life accusing her parents of abusing her, we do not know much about Bourgeois' own motherhood or her romantic relationship with her husband.

Unlike the stories from her early life, she shares hardly any anecdotes about her children or her husband. In order to substantiate this claim, I kept simple statistics to examine the frequency and the nature of the times where Bourgeois mentions her husband and her sons in comprehensive books about her life and works.

5.2.1. Husband: The Found Diamond

In a compilation of 150 print plates through 1993, edited by Deborah Wye, there is only one print of Bourgeois' husband. There are 4 different versions of the same print



Img 15: *Man Reading*, c.1940, lithograph print

which depicts her husband reading at a table. **(Img 15)** In the description, we read that Bourgeois' husband's work required him to always read and write. Bourgeois explains, "That was the way my life was then: I was waiting for a letter or I was watching Robert write or read."¹⁰⁰ We see the way Mr. Goldwater passes as an insignificant identity in Bourgeois' prints. He is a passive personality that Bourgeois watches from afar or she simply accompanies him in the same house. She does not

mention any interactions with him or any genuine interest in his work.

In the Barnadac & Obrists anthology, Mr. Goldwater is mentioned more than ten times. In none of these moments however Bourgeois reveals anything significant about her relationship with him. In a writing from 1998, we see Bourgeois' perception of Mr. Goldwater almost as an object: "I married a guy that I absolutely could not understand – he was so intellectual, and so predictable. I thought he was like a piece of architecture and I thought I had found a diamond."¹⁰¹ Like Bourgeois, her fans do not understand Goldwater at all either because she never mentions anything of significance about him. Was Goldwater simply a book-smart and boring person that had such great reputation that he was indispensable?

¹⁰⁰ Wye, 1994, p. 48.

¹⁰¹ Barnadac, and Obrist. 1998, p.170.

From yet another snippet in an interview, we get a glimpse of how the couple's life was together between the couch and the table. Bourgeois mentions that Goldwater and she always used to talk about history: "I lived in bath of history. We talked of nothing but history. I had nothing against it, but it is not real stuff. It's not what art is made of."¹⁰² Possibly in a moment of loss of control, Bourgeois reveals that despite all his intellect, her husband did not give her sufficient mental stimulation. Maybe she had to maintain unsatisfying conversations with her husband in order not to lose contact with him. We do not have any proof about their relationship; we only have clues.

5.2.2. Sons: Four Men in the House

If Bourgeois was not having an enchanting romantic relationship with her husband, how was her relationship with her children? We know that she first adopted a son named Michel because she was unable to give birth at the time. Later on, she was able to give birth and had two sons: Jean-Louis and Alain. In the anthology by Barnadac & Obrist, her son Jean-Louis is mentioned only three times: once in a letter to a friend to imply the time after his birth, second in a letter again to say that she sent a postcard to him, and the last in the notes of an interviewer. Michel is mentioned only once: in the notes of the interviewer; and Alain only once as well in order to explain his son's unending fear of abandonment.

Except for one striking anecdote told by Jean-Louis in the documentary "The Spider, the Mistress..." we do not know much about what her sons thought about Bourgeois either. Jean-Louis recounts how Bourgeois once threw out a cooked leg of lamb because the family did not pay any compliments to her cooking skills. After her rage, Jean-Louis had to collect the leg from the street and eat it after it was washed. It is interesting to hear how Jean-Louis does not use the word "Mother" when telling this story about Bourgeois:

Louise cooked this magnificent leg of lamb one day. Her four men were there and we did the stupidest thing possible. We were speechless because Louise didn't cook often. And Louise was furious. We lived three flights up and she reacted by taking the leg of lamb and throwing it out the window. So we all went to the window and looked to see where the leg of lamb had rolled. And I was dispatched. I went to the

¹⁰² Barnadac, and Obrist. 1998, p.216.

right car and crawled under and I got the leg of lamb. The lamb was absolutely studded with gravel. And I brought it back upstairs, took it over to the kitchen sink where it was washed and we sat down and ate it without a word.¹⁰³ (*at the end of this anecdote, Jean-Louis looks profoundly at the camera and gives a slight shrug of helplessness*)

In addition to the extreme eruption of anger told in the story, the distance between Jean-Louis and his mother is revealed in the documentary. Before telling the story about her mother, Jean-Louis talks of his father and begins his sentence: “My father was an extremely intelligent man...”¹⁰⁴ Yet, in the anecdote above, he mentions his mother as if she is someone whom he had to witness in an uncomfortable moment. The way he uses “Louise” to talk about his mother is curious indeed. This story shows that no one in the family could stand against Bourgeois’ anger when it rose, and the children had to deal with it in terror until it passed. Is it not ironic that both in Louise’s and Jean-Louis’ family stories the dinner table is a place of injustice, frustration and anger?

Even though we do not have more information about Bourgeois’ family life, who can claim that she was not abusive to her own children? She does not provide access to the intimate part of her family life. We simply do not know, but we can make inferences.

5.2.3. Bourgeois’ own motherhood

We know more about Bourgeois’ anxieties about not being able to have a child than we do about sons and how she got along with them, is her anxieties about not being able to have a child. She mentions her fear when talking about one of her paintings from 1944 titled *Natural History*. She says that after adopting a child she felt like she was not complete because she could not procreate. “That was a time when I thought I couldn’t have any children, so I proved myself that I had the right to have a child. I was complete. I was not a mediated man, I was a woman.”¹⁰⁵ Bourgeois admits that without being able to give birth her to own child, she does not feel like a complete woman.

The social definitions of womanhood that equates femininity with the ability to

¹⁰³ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008, 1.09.15 - 1.10.09 minute.

¹⁰⁴ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008, 59.00 minute.

¹⁰⁵ Bernadac, and Obrist. 1998, p.120.

procreate haunts Bourgeois' psyche as it must have done to many women. The desire to have a child is inextricably tied with the social definitions of womanhood. In her *Femme-maisons*, we see women whose heads are replaced by houses. The editors of her MoMA show press release describe these women succinctly:

These creatures 'are prisoners of the house and also hide behind its facade, thereby denying and defining their female identity. [sic.]¹⁰⁶

In certain of the works in this series, we see women who are silently screaming behind the windows of the house. As seen in many women of the epoch, and even continuing today, the tensions between a woman's individuality and her motherhood was very real. In Bourgeois, we see her anxiety in many instances as mentioned above.

After giving birth to two sons, she becomes the only woman in the family; even their dog was male. Her position reflects that of a queen bee, where she in a sense serves to her tribe but at the same time each member serves the queen. (In earlier accounts, Bourgeois mentioned that the blatantly erect penis was merely a fragile male organ that needs her protection, just like she needs to care for the four males at her home.)

When talking about Bourgeois' own motherhood, it is important to mention how she felt about her mother years after her death. Her unresolved relationship with her mother finds its place in many sculptures, but we can never know its effects on her daily life as a mother of three.

The material was there taking all that room and bothering me, bothering me by its aggressive presence. And somehow the idea of the mother came to me. This is the way my mother impressed me, as very powerful, very silent, very judging, and controlling the whole studio. And naturally this piece became my mother. At that point I had my subject. I was going to express what I felt toward her... First I cut off her head, and I slit her throat... And after weeks and weeks of work, I thought, if this is the way I saw my mother, and then she did not like me.¹⁰⁷

Through her sculpture, Bourgeois psychoanalyzes her feelings towards her mother and faces her own aggressiveness reflected on her mother. The possibility of the mutuality of this emotion haunts her and she explains in the same paragraph that she goes into depression after this sculpture. In a way, she cannot deal with the existence of such an aggression towards her long-deceased mother. I do not intend to curtly judge Bourgeois' motherhood simply based on her unresolved emotions with her mother. Nevertheless, when

¹⁰⁶ MoMA Press release, p.4.

¹⁰⁷ Mc Crae, Trisha. "Louise Bourgeois. Maman: From the Outside In."

her ferocious temper in the family is taken into account, it is important to remember through her artistic practice, she deals with profound and complex emotions.

In conclusion, it is appropriate to infer that all the social roles that Bourgeois implies by the figures of Father, Mother, Mistress and Child refer to the way society defines and limits identities, resulting in illusory ideas about love, marriage and family. The anecdotes and interviews that are available about Bourgeois' life reveal that in her personal life she goes through difficulties in her relationships with her husband and sons. The reasons for the way her relationships unravel may partly be related with the limiting roles a woman like herself has in society. We can also read the same figures as different representations of Bourgeois' personality. If we take her long-time assistant Jerry Gorovy' claims as a base, "Her [Bourgeois'] whole body of work really is like a self-portrait,"¹⁰⁸ these characters can be the players that make up her personality: the feeble mother who is not always there as a mother, the oppressive father who can ignite terror and resentment, the vulnerable and inferior mistress who is objectified in society, and the helpless daughter who does not have agency. Perhaps the only way Bourgeois could deal with these personalities, which were all part of who she was, were to deny their existence. In order to deny them, she gave them a life by narrating them and externalizing them on other characters from her life. It is not possible to arrive at a simple and plain conclusion about *Child Abuse*. It may be better to just ask questions and come up with different point of views to consider revealing the different layers in the story and leave space for mystery about Bourgeois.

While the *Child Abuse* piece of 1982 tries to hide the artist's identity, her spider sculpture from 2000 seems to subtly unveil it. Her astonishing sculpture called *Maman* can arguable be the work that best answers the question: "What kind of an artist was Bourgeois?"

¹⁰⁸ Marion Cajori and Amei Wallach, 2008, 31.00-33.00 minute.

6. MAMAN: MOTHER OR A SELF-PORTRAIT?

As an artist whose art is fuelled by her personal life and whose life is lived as an extension of her art, Bourgeois ceaselessly pushes the boundaries of notions of gender. She brings together what may seem like opposite elements and claims a unity out of them. She provokes viewers with incongruous comments on her works that seem to contrast her imagery. She repeats a certain narrative about her life for over two decades and refuses to give details on other aspects of her life. Her works, combined with the artistic persona she performs around her works, encapsulate what Bourgeois represents on the complexity and fluidity of gender. In arguably her most recognized sculpture, *Maman*, we can see what may be called a *culmination* of her representation of gender. Namely, her self-representation through the lens of gender in this particular work can show us Bourgeois' unique take on gender and the alternative she offers on its definition.

Maman (which translates to “Mom”) is a nine-meter, steel sculpture of a spider that carries a sack of eggs beneath her body. It was commissioned by Tate Modern for the opening of its new industrial scale, Turbine Hall, in 2000.¹⁰⁹ Though it was the first time that Bourgeois built a spider of such enormous scale, spiders have been a recurring figure in her art. As early as 1948, she made drawings of spider figures in various formats, in both black and red ink, in lithographs and gravures.¹¹⁰ In 1997, she created her first spider sculpture, attached to one of her *Cells*, an architectural structure like a room in which the artist created environments filled with objects from her past. The themes of her *Cells* vary and invite discourse on topics such as home, fear, voyeurism, and architecture as a narrative, among other things. Her *Cells* are complex and rich, and portray her great artistic talent. Especially *Spider* (1997), whose ceiling is formed by the belly of a spider, highlight Bourgeois' relationship with her mother and the times she spent in the tapestry workshop.

¹⁰⁹ Manchester, Elizabeth. “Louise Bourgeois - Maman.” Tate.org, Dec. 2009, www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625. Accessed 3 March 2016.

¹¹⁰ Among the spider figures Bourgeois used are *Araignée* (1948), *Ode a ma mère* (1995), *Repairs in the Sky* (1999), *Dancing Insect* (1999), *Study for Hairy Spider* (2001) *Spider Woman* (2004).

(Img 16) Instead of focusing on these works, which leave more room for commentary because the artist is not able to explain them in full detail due to their complexity, I will focus on *Maman*, the single giant sculpture, reduced of its cell beneath, that comes with a



Img 16: *Spider*, 1997

suggestive title and a full package of explanation by the artist. Focusing on this work and the artists' available discourse on it will give me the opportunity to look beyond what Bourgeois offers and suggest a different reading about the themes that the artist deals with.

One way of reading this work with a point of view different than what is provided by the artist herself is to see it as one of the final self-portraits of an artist who is at the ultimate climax of her career and nearing her final years. (Bourgeois was 89 years old when she was commissioned the work.) Created after such experience and recognition in the arts, this sculpture can be seen as an ambitious yet candid self-portrait of Bourgeois. It can be viewed as the final monument the artist wanted to leave of herself to mark her place in the art world. Although the written account of the artist does not directly prove my claim, certain connections with her earlier work that can show that this is not a feeble claim at all.

(Img 16)



Img 17: *Maman*, 2000
Installation view from Turbine Hall, Tate Museum

Bourgeois often talks about *Maman* as representing her mother's protectiveness, cleverness, and agility. She says that her mother was her "best friend. She was deliberate, clever, patient, soothing, reasonable, dainty, subtle, indispensable, neat, and as useful as a spider."¹¹¹ She also highlights the productivity of a spider when weaving webs and identifies her mother with those skills. Unlike the artist's innocent and friendly explanation of the spider, the gigantic sculpture, which dwarfs its viewers and makes them literally

¹¹¹ Manchester, 2009.

crawl under the steel legs of the animal, *Maman* looks scary. Walking around it, one feels intimidated.¹¹² Indeed, the dynamics of fear and awe between a mother and a daughter can be further examined. The claims of Bourgeois and several critics who take her words as final can be substantiated by theoretical texts such as Monique Plaza's seminal work *The Mother the Same: Hatred of Mother in Psychoanalysis*. Plaza writes extensively on the "reciprocal prison between the mother and the child," in which both the mother and the child undergoes severe psychological challenges due to the fusional nature of the relationship.¹¹³ She also explains how it is difficult for both parties to break free from this fusion. In that vein, admiration and gratefulness, frustration and psychic enmity between the mother and daughter can indeed be found in *Maman*. However Bal convinces one not to stop at this explanation:

In cases such as Bourgeois', where the artist is extremely articulate and strongly committed to preventing the misunderstandings that constantly threaten her complex work so as to present it according to her intentions, the criticism of the work tends to reiterate simply what the artist says it means. The result is the frequent quotations from her statements and interviews that intersperse presentations of her work. This biographism is blended with iconography when critics reiterate, that the figure of the spider is a metaphor for her mother's protective and caring attitude within family life. But if we want to dream about a non-reductive engagement with visual art, this reason-based subjectivity must be allowed to go to sleep.¹¹⁴

Taking Bal's advice, if we let go of Bourgeois' reason-based subjectivity and focus mainly on the characteristics of the work itself, we see a very evocative structure and imagery.

It is important to note that the sculpture was designed to be viewed in an industrial space, a five-storey building with 3,400 square metres of space that "once housed the electricity generators of the old power station."¹¹⁵ Accordingly, her work had to speak to the cold and warehouse-like environment of the venue, without being lost or overpowered by its vast volume. Moreover, being invited to the inauguration show of Tate Modern, one of the top modern art museums in the world, in a country other than her native one or her

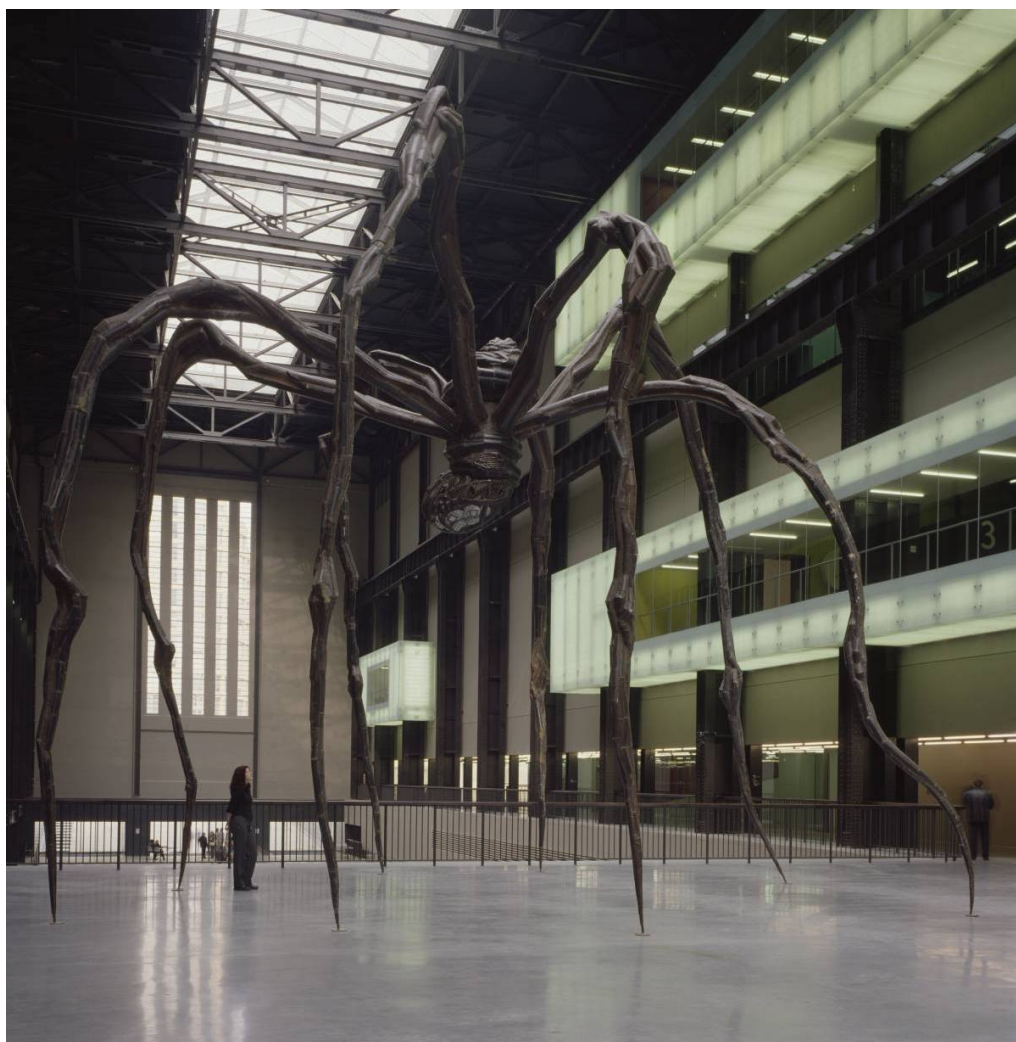
¹¹² As read in Trisha McCrae's article, certain visitors have a significant aversion to this sculpture because of its sheer scale. (Mc Crae, Trisha. "Louise Bourgeois. Maman: From the Outside In.")

¹¹³ Plaza, Monique. "The Mother/The Same: Hatred of the Mother in Psychoanalysis." *Feminist Issues*, Spring, 1982, p.84

¹¹⁴ Bal, 1999, p.121.

¹¹⁵ Brooks, Xan. "The Guardian Profile: Rachel Whiteread." *The Guardian - Art & Design*, 7 Oct. 2005, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2005/oct/07/art. Accessed 20 April 2006.

home, undoubtedly was a great honour for Bourgeois. The sheer scale of *Maman* can be put into context in the light of this information. **(Img 17)**



Img 18: *Maman*, 2000
Installation view from Turbine Hall, Tate Museum

Several authors note how the size of the spider's legs evokes a sense of a building. Elizabeth Manchester of Tate Modern emphasizes how the sculpture's curved legs resemble gothic columns that "rise to lofty heights above the congregation of an open cathedral."¹¹⁶ The visitors who walk near the legs look nine meters up through these "columns" only to discover a steel sac covered with what looks like mesh, containing more than twenty large marble eggs. **(Img 19)** Marking the centre of the dome-like

¹¹⁶ Manchester, 2009.



Img 19: detail from *Maman*

structure, the sac is seen only from below and cannot be reached. The experience of looking up at the eggs must mimic the act of looking up in an awe-inspiring church according to Manchester. At the centre of this holy experience stand the eggs – an allusion to creative power, of the artist and the mother.

There is something very eerie and jolting about the steel legs. They look terribly realistic in their rendition, except for their size. They look quite meaty, sturdy and brittle at the same time despite being made of hard metal. Weighing six tons, the sculpture is hold up by eight slender legs that are attached to the floor with a circular sole of about a five-centimetre diameter. As observed by Bal, “the legs are thick yet, like a ballerina's they stand on fine points of needle-sharp 'toes'.”¹¹⁷ Although it is a bit ironic to associate spider legs with the elegant and powerful movements of a dancer,

it rings true if you crop out the head of the spider from the frame. When we focus our attention solely on the legs, we see that some are bending away from the center and some are bending in, making it seem as if the spider is in the middle of a crawl movement and can continue to move at any moment. One foot looks shorter and more extended as if it is about to pull the spider’s body forward. All legs stand as if charged with energy. Their curves look very organic and natural as if the material is not steel but in fact an actual muscle. Bourgeois’ spider is as hard as the



Img 20: A 10-cm long spider, photographed for National Geographic by Robbie Shone

¹¹⁷ Bal, 1999, p.107.

steel structures hidden behind the concrete of the building that houses it, but it is filled with life and it is anything but rigid. **(Img 20)**

Can this erected spider be Bourgeois' response to all phallic-looking sculptures before it, especially in a building imbued with the memory of industrialism, a male-dominated power-station, marked by a rigid and cold architecture that simply dwarfs human dimensions? Can *Maman* be Bourgeois' unique take on the tradition of phallic monuments and her attempt to mark her place in the history of art by reverting it? Perhaps, it is her way of saying "*I am here, in the same line of history with all men, standing tall in all my fragility and strength.*"

The way *Maman*'s legs stand with all their curves and movements in juxtaposition with the symmetrical and inorganic architecture of the hall seems to me as Bourgeois' resistance, even her uprising, against everyone who has tried to define her. The spider's legs are as hard as steel, yet they are as fragile as an actual spider. As an artist and a person, she is not evil but not angelic either, nor rigid or invulnerable. She may be creative as a spider who weaves, but the extent of her emotions includes horror and intimidation as well. Her presence may be protective and nightmarish at the same time. Through *Maman*, Bourgeois creates herself, expresses her identity, and builds it as a structure that can compete with massive architectures surrounding it.

Not only in the Turbine hall, but also at other open-air venues where different editions of *Maman* have been installed, we can observe the way the spider takes its place in the skyline of the city. It almost challenges the starchitect buildings like the Guggenheim Bilbao and rivals it. **(Img 21)** In many of the places the sculpture has been installed up to now¹¹⁸, including several art museums worldwide, it highlights an opposition with the architecture. Its material is steel certain editions and bronze in others, speaking to the material of the buildings that it stands against. However, unlike a building, one cannot climb up *Maman*; one can only observe and experience. In certain cases, the spider even looks as if it can climb up and create a web around the whole building. The tension between the organic nature of the spider and the rigid, inanimate nature of the buildings is apparent even in installation photos of the work. **(Img 22, 23)**

¹¹⁸ Among the permanent installation locations of *Maman* are: National Gallery of Canada; Guggenheim Museum Bilbao; Mori Art Museum Tokyo; Leeum Samsung Museum of Art, South Korea; Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Arkansas. The sculpture was also on temporary view in other museums, and public spaces such as Rockefeller Center Plaza, New York; Jardin de Tuileries, Paris; City Hall, The Hague; National Convention Center, Qatar among others.



Img 21: Installation view of *Maman* at Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain



Img 22: Installation view of *Maman* at Ropongi Hills Complex, Tokyo, Japan



Img 23: *Installation view of Maman* at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa

Yet, one should not think of architecture simply in literal terms, but think of it as all the constructed and confined notions of femininity, motherhood, wife, artist, and grown-up. Bourgeois attempts to create something authentic to stand up against all these notions both with this sculpture and her previous artworks as implied by the eggs of the animal.

There are more reasons to think the spider can indeed be a self-portrait of Bourgeois. Karin Mamma Andersson, a Swedish artist, comments in an interview conducted by Louisiana Channel, that spiders are fascinating and deserve respect, because they build their impressive webs with their own material that they produce in their own body. In a way, their web comes out of them.¹¹⁹ In a similar fashion, it can be said that Bourgeois as an artist creates her work with inspiration from within. She looks inside and into her own life and creates. The analogy between weaving and drawing was in fact first made by the artist herself:

¹¹⁹ Lund, Christian, "Three Artists on a Spider by Louise Bourgeois." Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, 23 Mar. 2015, www.youtube.com/watch?v=SZcEVkrCD5w. Accessed 10 October 2016.

What is a drawing? it is a secretion, like a thread in a spider's web ... It is a knitting, a spiral, a spider web and other significant organisations of space.[sic]¹²⁰

She likens the process of drawing, keeping daily journal-like drawings, to the natural phenomena of a spider's secretion. The spiders weave in order to capture their pray and feed themselves. It is an instinctual action they take in order to survive. For Bourgeois as well, drawing and making art, as she mentioned in several interviews as well, is vital. It is the only way she keeps sane. The natural flow of art making is her way of living, or weaving her web of survival.

The allegory of weaving also resonates with psychoanalysis, a process Bourgeois started after the death of her father and continued for almost thirty years. She would sometimes meet with her analyst as frequent as thrice a week. Even though she does not openly reveal whether or how psychoanalysis helped her, we know that she did not quit therapy for most of her life. A rough metaphor for the process of psychoanalysis would not be too different than weaving, and a reorganization/re-writing of the analysand's own reality. With the free association method, the patient approaches the reality of her subconscious and faces how her reality is inscribed in her psyche. By telling and retelling the stories from her life in the safe environment of psychoanalysis, the patient finds the opportunity to weave her life story, and rewrite it in his or her own terms. The telling and the processing of the story, just like the secretions coming from inside a spider's body, and the delicate weaving of them, help the patient to create a saner reality for herself.

In *Maman*, we do not see the webs yet we see the eggs. According to Bal, "the basket filled with eggs is both her [Bourgeois'] body and her yield."¹²¹ The same way her life is her art. What she creates makes up who she is. In fact, in her earlier prints, Bourgeois uses eggs to represent children. In *Girl Falling* (1947), she draws a pregnant woman whose belly is transparent and filled with eggs. In a series of drawings titled *Saint Sebastienne* (1993), Bourgeois depicts a cat that carries three eggs on her head. **(Img 24)**

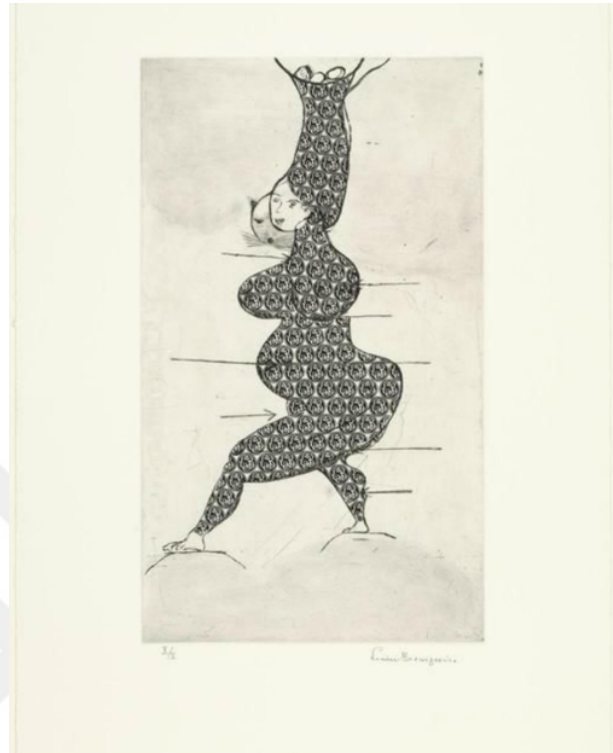
Considering the artist's three children at the time, the number of eggs must not be a coincidence. About this work, the artist explains:

"She becomes frightened for what she is responsible for... for what she owns. It is her three eggs... she takes them with her and hides them using her hair. She takes

¹²⁰ Manchester, 2009.

¹²¹ Bal, 1999, p. 123.

them away. She was not prepared... she is very vulnerable... The running-away figure here is only interested in survival."¹²²



Img 24: *Stamp of Memories*, 1993, print

She also explains in the same catalogue that this figure is a self-portrait. It conveys the fears that the artist has as a mother about being able to protect and look after her children. What is similar between this drawing and the sculpture is that in both of them, the eggs are placed high up, and vulnerability is suggested. If we do not take the eggs merely as Bourgeois' children but interpret it as her entire oeuvre, we can understand how expression is both a way of liberation and vulnerability for her. Making art and expressing herself is a vital need for her, yet she cannot escape exposing herself. Beneath the sturdy yet brittle-looking body of the spider lies Bourgeois' creations. It is what makes her feminine. Without the egg sac, the spider would be male and look utterly threatening at such size. It would not offer enough elements for people to identify with. Yet with the existence of an egg sac, filled with potential, the spider looks more "human" in a way. Her eggs and her

¹²² Bourgeois, Louise. "Prints of Louise Bourgeois. Stamp of Memories I (1993)." *MoMA.org*, Museum of Modern Art, www.moma.org/collection_lb/browse_results.php?object_id=71830.

instinct to protect her eggs, makes her vulnerable and justifies any aggression that she may convey.

Although this renowned sculpture cannot be solely *one* thing, and presents a plethora of clues for different interpretations, I chose to read it a self-portrait of the artist. Seen as a metaphoric self-portrait, this work reveals a lot about Bourgeois and her motivations. It shows the methods that she uses in order to create an authentic self-expression in which the notion of gender is challenged. Even though it seems like Bourgeois is continuing the phallogocentric tradition of monument erecting, such as Brancusi's tower, by building a nine-meter sculpture, she does not. I believe that, even with a minimal gesture, she challenges the notion of a monument. Her *Maman* replicates the overwhelming sizes of phallic monuments, yet it does not replicate their masculinity, symmetry, or calculatedness. The sculpture integrates opposing elements, such as sturdiness with fragility, skilful movement with weightiness, threat with protectiveness. She challenges the reasonable explanation and presents a self-portrait in all its confusing unity and aliveness. She adds her unique twist in the tradition of monument buildings and shows that an artist can be all of this and be an adequate rival to others preceding her.

One can say that the only feminine aspect of this threatening sculpture is the egg sack. It is true that the sculpture is laden with masculine attributes like steel, weight, size, and the idea of control. It may not be a coincidence that Bourgeois chooses to identify with an animal who is known to consume its male mate during copulation, which is an all-powerful female symbol. Yet by merging artistic and female creativity in the same sculpture, Bourgeois shows that both the feminine and the masculine can exist simultaneously and without negating each other. One may aptly question the reason why the artist confines such a rich work by simply limiting it to the image of her mother. While I do not have a certain answer, I believe she uses her mother as a cover up because her mysteries keep her strong and not so vulnerable. She hides herself under the cover of her mother, just like she covers herself under the implied femininity of the powerful *La Filette*. Her enigmatic explanations on her own works may in fact be the reason of their richness, since such simplifications force certain art historians to dig more and reach for more.

7. CONCLUSION

My thesis attempts to focus on the life and works of a single female artist, namely Louise Bourgeois, in order to apprehend what they may reveal about identity building and the role of gender in identity. I examine five main artworks of Bourgeois from different periods: her self-portrait photograph with *La Fillette* (1982), her costume for a banquet *Avenza* (1975), *The Destruction of the Father* (1974), *Janus Fleuri* (1968) and *Maman* (2000). In addition to these, I consider a photo-text by the artist and the retelling of the same tangerine narrative as examples for her performative moments that reveal some of the important themes that her art deals with. I aim to understand what kind of artistic persona Bourgeois was performing and constructing at the same time. Considering some of her far-fetched comments about her own works, I was intrigued to see the status of “gender” in her works. What was the way she “performed” femininity, and masculinity? What kind of the gender dynamics did Bourgeois’ life and art propose?

As I researched her works, her life, and her writings on her works, I realized that for quite a long time, Bourgeois portrayed the image of a hurt woman destroyed by her father’s insensibilities and his marital disloyalty. To protect herself from her oppressive father, she held on to her mother. Nevertheless, she had been angry at her too since she shared the crimes of her father.

Since Bourgeois spoke and wrote extensively about her works, to the point where “over-writing” became “un-writing,” to use Mieke Bal’s analogy,¹²³ I felt compelled to look at as many of her works as possible in order to create links of my own between her works. In one of her earlier prints from *Stamp of Memories* series, there was a female figure with the **LB** stamp covering her entire body. The artist explained that the elaborate and intertwined LB letters were from her father’s personal stamp. His name was **Louis Bourgeois**. She used this stamp to prove herself that her father’s “stamp [was] only skin-

¹²³ “Over-Writing as Un-Writing: Descriptions, World-Making, and Novelistic Time” is the title of a chapter in Bal, Mieke. *A Mieke Bal Reader*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2006.

deep, only a garment...I do not need this brand, I have my own," she proposed.¹²⁴ I believe her commentary on this drawing stands as the symbol of her life, and foreshadows the struggle she had all her life: How to own up to her identity, not deny it, but at the same time completely transform it, so nobody even remembers what the initial LB stood for. What to do with her bitterness and frustrations about her father, and how to avenge it?

She created several works that dealt with her anger towards her father, the most direct of which was arguably, *The Destruction of the Father*. It is very interesting to compare this work with one of her latest sculptures, *Maman*. While we see a cannibalized and emasculated body of the father in the first one, we see a glorified, transfigured image of the mother, disguised as self-portrait, in the second one. Ironically, "the mother" (*Maman*) stands taller, stronger and more masculine than the father on a butcher's bed (*Destruction of the Father*). Towards the end of her life, Bourgeois manages to create a monumental self-portrait defying her father's ghost, with all her strength as well as her fragility. Putting aside the stamp **LB**, she creates her own stamp of spiders, exhibited all over the world, and engraves her name in art history.

Kuspit claims that Bourgeois becomes a hermaphrodite by acquiring a penis of her own and gaining phallic power.¹²⁵ Contrary to Kuspit, I argue that instead of simply acquiring a penis, she intertwines phallic authority with a powerful femininity and creates a gender that is neither feminine nor masculine, neither her father's nor her mother's. She creates a gender that is a unity of both. In one of her interviews, Bourgeois mentions this unity, "We are all vulnerable in some way and we are all male-female."¹²⁶ Her claim, goes beyond all gender norms and focuses on humanity, the mortality, and fragility we all have.

According to contemporary artist İnci Eviner, art strives not to define or represent any "thing". Most of the times artworks stand ahead of theory; they go beyond it and have the power to shake the relationship between art and life. More influential than theory, artworks have the power to strike an epiphany. Theories of gender spectrum have existed for many years. The refusal of gender binaries and the fact that most people fall somewhere in between both the two extremes were known, even though not widely accepted. We can say that long before Butler, Haraway and many others, Bourgeois conveyed ideas about

¹²⁴ Louise Bourgeois - The Complete Prints and Books: Stamp of Memories I." *Moma.org*, www.moma.org/collection_lb/object.php?object_id=71830.

¹²⁵ Kuspit.

¹²⁶ Louise Bourgeois qtd. in Lippard, 1975, p.31.

the non-binary nature of gender. She showed that alternatives exist and one can and does defy the norms.

My research shows that even before the discussions of the term “queer” and its formation, Bourgeois performed an almost-queer identity that extended the definitions of gender and illuminated the complex and intertwined nature of femininity and masculinity.

Reading Bourgeois’ artistic life in the light of Butler’s theory of gender, reveals the role of her discourses and actions that served in her identity-building process. In her seminal text, *Gender Trouble*, Butler explains:

Performativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.¹²⁷

She points out that the performative aspect of gender comes mainly from its repetition. The act is repeated in such a natural way that it no longer feels like an act, and becomes the accepted norm. I believe this is exactly what tricked and dumbfounded the contemporaneous historians about Bourgeois. The way she repeated and acted out certain narratives about her life and herself, i.e. the tangerine story, was so pervasive and second nature that people did not question their performative aspects. The way she acted out her father’s “ritual” of drawing on a fruit and then cutting it out speaks exactly to what Butler suggests.

Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. That the gendered body is performative suggests that it has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute reality.¹²⁸

As Butler points out, gender is the sum of performances, gestures and enactments. Gender is not stable or inherent, but solely constructed and accepted. Bourgeois’ artistic persona and most of her works exemplify Butler’s theory. Throughout her life she constructs a particular narrative of her life, excludes details of her private life with her husband and sons, and solely focused on her childhood. These all become Bourgeois’ performance of a certain gender. Perhaps, it is more appropriate to say she *fabricates* her own gender by repeating certain performative moments. For a long time, she portrays

¹²⁷ Butler, 1999, p. xv

¹²⁸ Butler, 1999, p. 173

herself as a young girl still under the oppression of her father. While she continuously stages the discourse of a young and vulnerable girl (i.e. her reasoning for bringing *La Filette* to Mapplethorpe's studio, her explanations for *The Destruction of the Father*, and her supposed awe for her mother in *Maman*), her works featured a powerful, solid, and aggressive figure with masculine attributes. The discrepancy between her works and her performances alongside her works open up a way for an ambiguous notion of gender. With her performative actions, she blurs the lines between two sexes. She shows us a woman who acquired her own penis, a woman who built her own phallic-feminine portrait and exhibited it against structures of patriarchy. She challenges our imagination with the torso of a male animal covered with breasts, and in a different work boasts her own sexuality by putting on a cloak covered in udders. All her juxtapositions find an expression in her artistic performances. As Butler writes;

If the inner truth of gender is a fabrication and if a true gender is a fantasy instituted and inscribed on the surface of bodies, then it seems that genders can be neither true or false, but are only produced as the truth effects of a discourse of primary and stable identity.¹²⁹

The performative actions of Bourgeois show us that gender identity is not stable and is not inherent. In her works and her interviews, she takes the gender that was inscribed on her body and subverts it. She takes the labels that her father and society forced on her and transforms it into something of her own, something neither true or false, neither fixed or stable. She finds a way to liberate herself from societal norms of gender by fabricating her own identity, an identity that was on the verge of what we call today *queer*, in order to emphasize a sense of liberation and a positive connotation of *in-between*, a *neither-nor*.

Looking at the constructed artistic persona of Bourgeois today helps us see the norms of gender that are still ongoing. Her ideas and works that challenge the current gender norms are still valid today where we still cannot talk of an equality of gender, and where women have to organize a nation-wide march to demonstrate their female existence and objections to patriarchal politics.¹³⁰ Bourgeois' art has a lot to say to women artists, and

¹²⁹ Butler, 1999, p. 174

¹³⁰ Woman's March was a global protest rally realized on January 21, 2017, primarily united against the politics of Donald Trump. Women from several states in the US and other cities in the world marched to show their support for basic women's.

any women with a career or aspiring to have a career and struggle to have an authentic identity in the still male-dominated circles.

Aside from the notions of gender, there is another aspect that my research on Bourgeois brings up. The abundance of artist's own commentaries on her works, and the article of several historians that mostly reiterate what she says and often point out to new links about works. In this inflation of information, the question of "what is a work of art and who gets to claim the final word on it" appears. May be the notion of "a last word" is not even relevant for artworks as they keep evolving. And maybe to think that any entity can have enough authority over a work of art, not even the artist, to cease the discussion on it, is also unthinkable. In spite of all this, I find the way art historians went about in Bourgeois' case intriguing and regrettably non-progressive.

The catalogue by Deborah Wye, *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois*, is printed in 1994 after in the artist donated all her prints to MoMA in 1990. It features more than hundred and fifty of her prints. It notes on the cover of the book that, the artist

was interviewed at length about each of her compositions...the resulting commentaries published here provides revealing insights into the meanings and motivations of her intensely personal art.¹³¹

I cannot help but question the notion of interviewing an artist about each work and writing down her comments as the words of a holy book. The same practice is valid for Lawrence Rinder's *Drawings and Observations*. Even though Rinder does not unveil the process of his book, it consists of reproductions of Bourgeois' works along with the artist's comment on them.

These examples inspired me to think about questions such as: How much of the mystery that Bourgeois was able to maintain about her life can be attributed to art historians and critiques of her time? What is the reason why there are so many books on Bourgeois' own comments? What is the role and responsibility of art historians when recording works of art for future generations? How should the "context of an artwork" be redefined so that the artist can be kept away from confining her own art?

My research on Bourgeois reveals that the artist kept contradicting her works with her own explanations. Even though she urged writers "not to take her seriously", she constantly tried to exert power over her works. I realized that every discourse could be

¹³¹ Wye, 1994, left jacket of the book

taken further and enriched by digging deeper into the context. By pushing beyond each narration offered by the artist, it is possible to get closer to what she created. As art historians and cultural theorists, it becomes our duty to question the dynamics behind the authority of the artist and challenge them, interpret her comments in novel ways and be able to sustain them with content and context-based evidence. After reading so many bland and repetitive accounts on the works Bourgeois, I came to believe that insightful art history requires personal and imaginative commentary, and not just recitations. Artist interviews and statements are always abound, but educated minds to connect seemingly unrelated links and see an entirety within an artist's oeuvre are few. Therefore, I attempted a novel way of reading *Maman* myself and tried to subvert the authority of Bourgeois.

Even though the extent of my research was limited to certain series of the artist, and I clearly have not been able to research each interview, I nevertheless discovered a motif in her narratives, and it would not be wrong to assume this trend encompasses all her works. Bourgeois' artistic creation is still an inspiration to many. Her works can be examined from many different perspectives. I looked only at a glimpse of her production and discovered her insightful point of view on gender, which could undoubtedly be further examined.

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Img 1 Louise Bourgeois, *Orange Episode*, 1990.

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Img 2 Louise Bourgeois, *Untitled*, 1990.

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Img 3 Louise Bourgeois by Robert Mapplethorpe, 1982

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Img 4 Louise Bourgeois, *La Fillette*, 1968.

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Img 5 Detail of Louise Bourgeois, *La Fillette*, 1968.

Img 6 Louise Bourgeois wearing AVENZA costume, 1975.

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Img 7 Statue of Diane of Ephesus

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Img 8 Louise Bourgeois, *Femme-Maison* (1945-47)

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Img 9 Louise Bourgeois, *Nature Study*, 1986.

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Img 10 Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, 1974, Proa Musuem installation view 2011.

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Img 11 Louise Bourgeois, *Destruction of the Father*, detail. Installation view from 1974.

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Img 12 Theater scene-like installation of *Destruction of the Father*, 1974, Proa Museum installation view 2011

“Louise Bourgeois: The Return of the Repressed .” Proa Museum, proa.org/eng/exhibition-louise-bourgeois-obras-12.php. Accessed 4 Nov. 2016

Img 13 Louise Bourgeois, *Janus Fleuri*, 1968.
<http://china.interconnex.org/2012/10/11/louise-bourgeois/>

Img 14 Louise Bourgeois, installation view from Dia:Beacon featuring *Janus Fleuri* series

<http://diaart.org/program/exhibitions-projects/louise-bourgeois-collection-display>

Img 15 Louise Bourgeois, *Man Reading*, c.1940, lithograph print
Wye, Deborah et al. *The Prints of Louise Bourgeois*. New York, Museum of Modern Art, 1994. p.48

Img 16 Louise Bourgeois, *Spider*, 1997.
Installation view (Bordeaux) photo Frédéric Delpech
<http://www.hausderkunst.de/en/exhibitions/detail/louise-bourgeois-structures-of-existence-the-cells/>

Img 17 Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 2000 Installation view from Turbine Hall, Tate Museum.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625>

Img 18 Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 2000 Installation view from Turbine Hall, Tate Museum.
<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bourgeois-maman-t12625>

Img 19 Detail of Louise Bourgeois, *Maman*, 2000.
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Img 20 A 10-cm long spider, photographed for National Geographic by Robbie Shone.
<https://www.instagram.com/p/BN60X3CjNh2/>

Img 21 Installation view of *Maman* at Guggenheim Museum, Bilbao, Spain.
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Spider_Maman_and_Guggenheim_museum_a_Bilbao.jpg#/media/File:Spider_Maman_and_Guggenheim_museum_at_Bilbao.jpg

Img 22 Installation view of *Maman* at Ropongi Hills Complex, Tokyo, Japan

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Img 23 *Installation view of Maman* at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa
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Img 24 Louise Bourgeois, *Stamp of Memories*, 1993, print.
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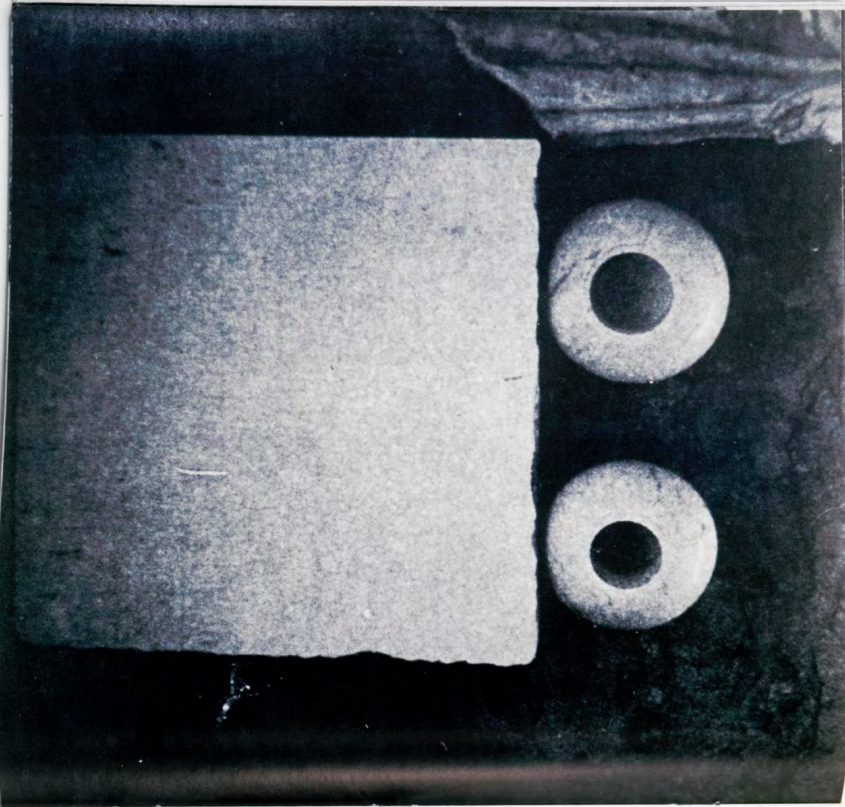
APPENDIX 1





A Project by Louise Bourgeois

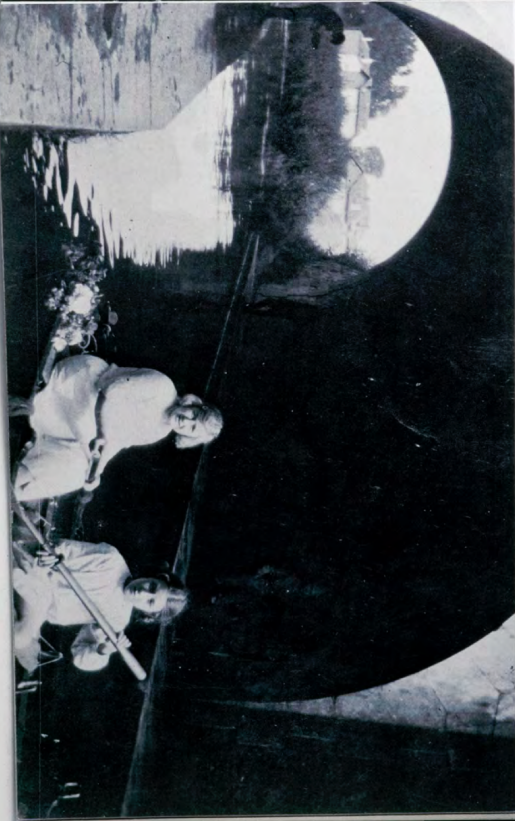
Child Abuse



Some of us are so obsessed with the past that we die of it. It is the attitude of the poet who never finds the lost heaven and it is really the situation of artists who work for a reason that nobody can quite grasp. They might want to reconstruct something of the past to exercise it. It is that the past for certain people has such a hold and such a beauty....

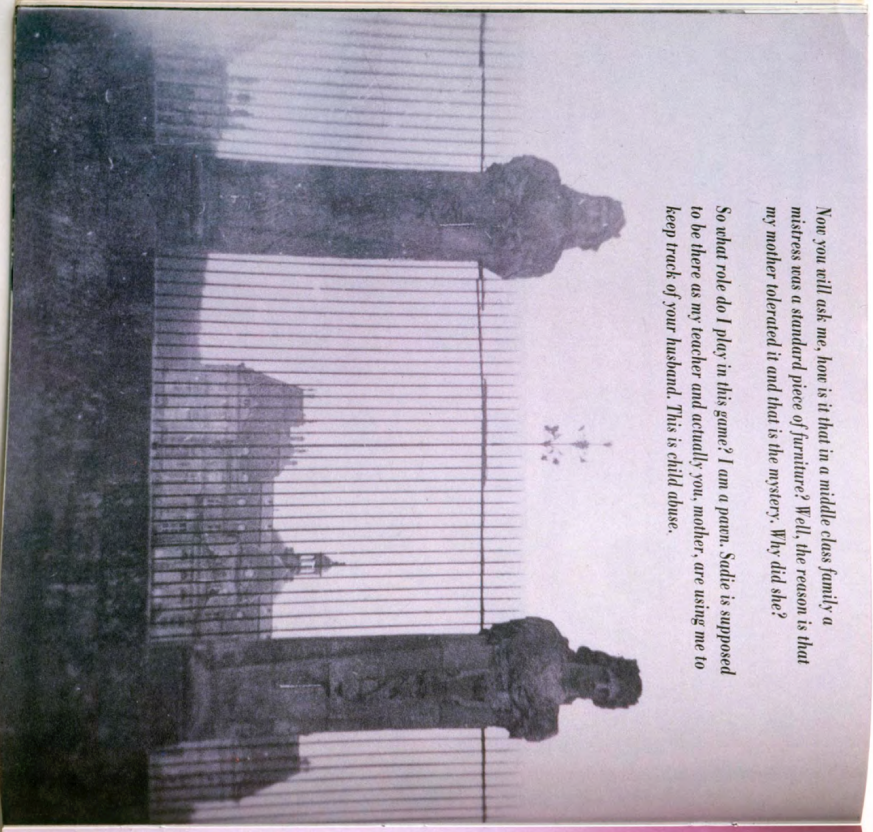
Everything I do was inspired by my early life.

On the left, the woman in white is The Mistress. She was introduced into the family as a teacher but she slept with my father and she stayed for ten years.



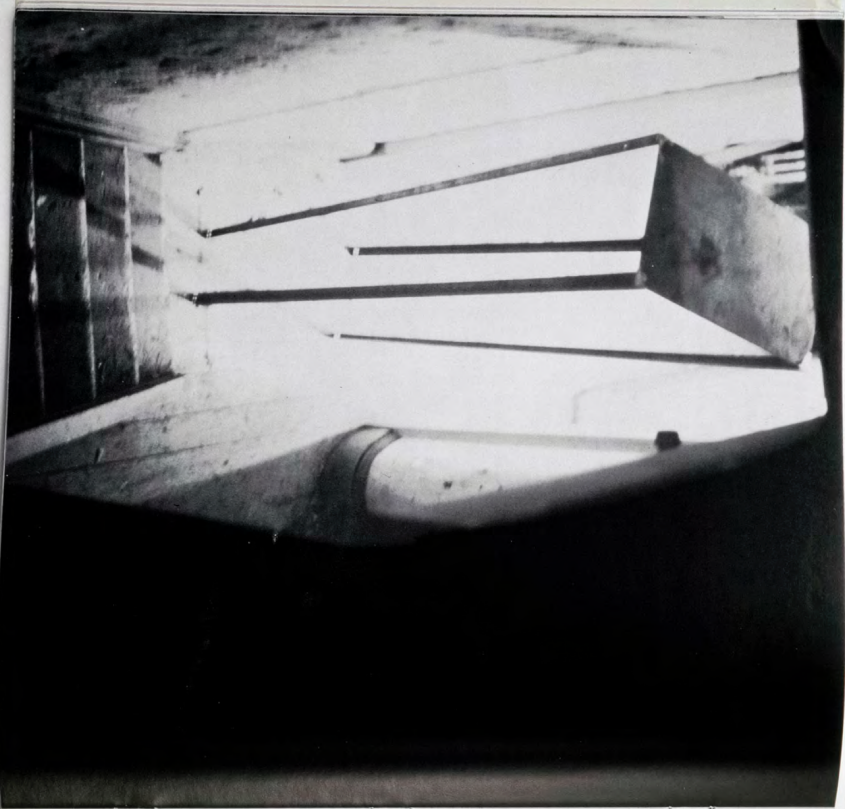
Now you will ask me, how is it that in a middle class family a mistress was a standard piece of furniture? Well, the reason is that my mother tolerated it and that is the mystery. Why did she?

So what role do I play in this game? I am a pawn. Sadie is supposed to be there as my teacher and actually you, mother, are using me to keep track of your husband. This is child abuse.



Because Sadie, if you don't mind, was mine. She was engaged to teach me English. I thought she was going to like me. Instead of which she betrayed me. I was betrayed not only by my father, damn it, but by her too. It was a double betrayal. There are rules of the game. You cannot have people breaking them right and left. In a family a minimum of conformity is expected.





I am sorry to get so excited but I still react to it.

Concerning Sadie, for too many years I had been frustrated in my terrific desire to twist the neck of this person.

Everyday you have to abandon your past or accept it and then if you cannot accept it you become a sculptor.

47

The artist's interpretation of the work of Louise Bourgeois was inspired by the Museum of Modern Art in New York, with the help of the artist's studio.

